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by HARRY F. OLMSTED

ALAMO DEADLINE
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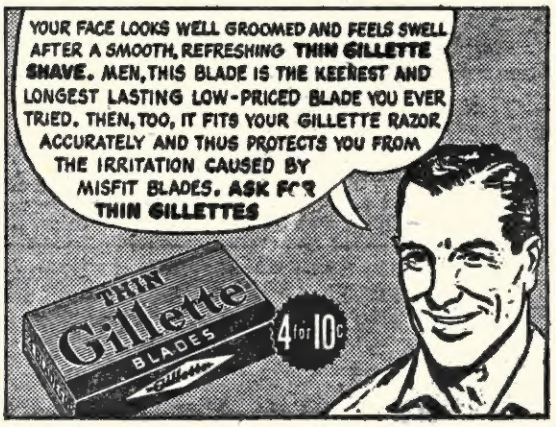
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★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **Six Complete Novels** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**ALAMO DEADLINE**.....*BOB OBETS* **8**
Santa Anna's bands shrilled the *deguello*—no quarter to gringos! And, as the Mexican batteries opened on the Alamo, Shelby Lee, American, wondered if he had guts enough to live. . . .

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**DECEMBER ISSUE** **OUT NOVEMBER 7!**

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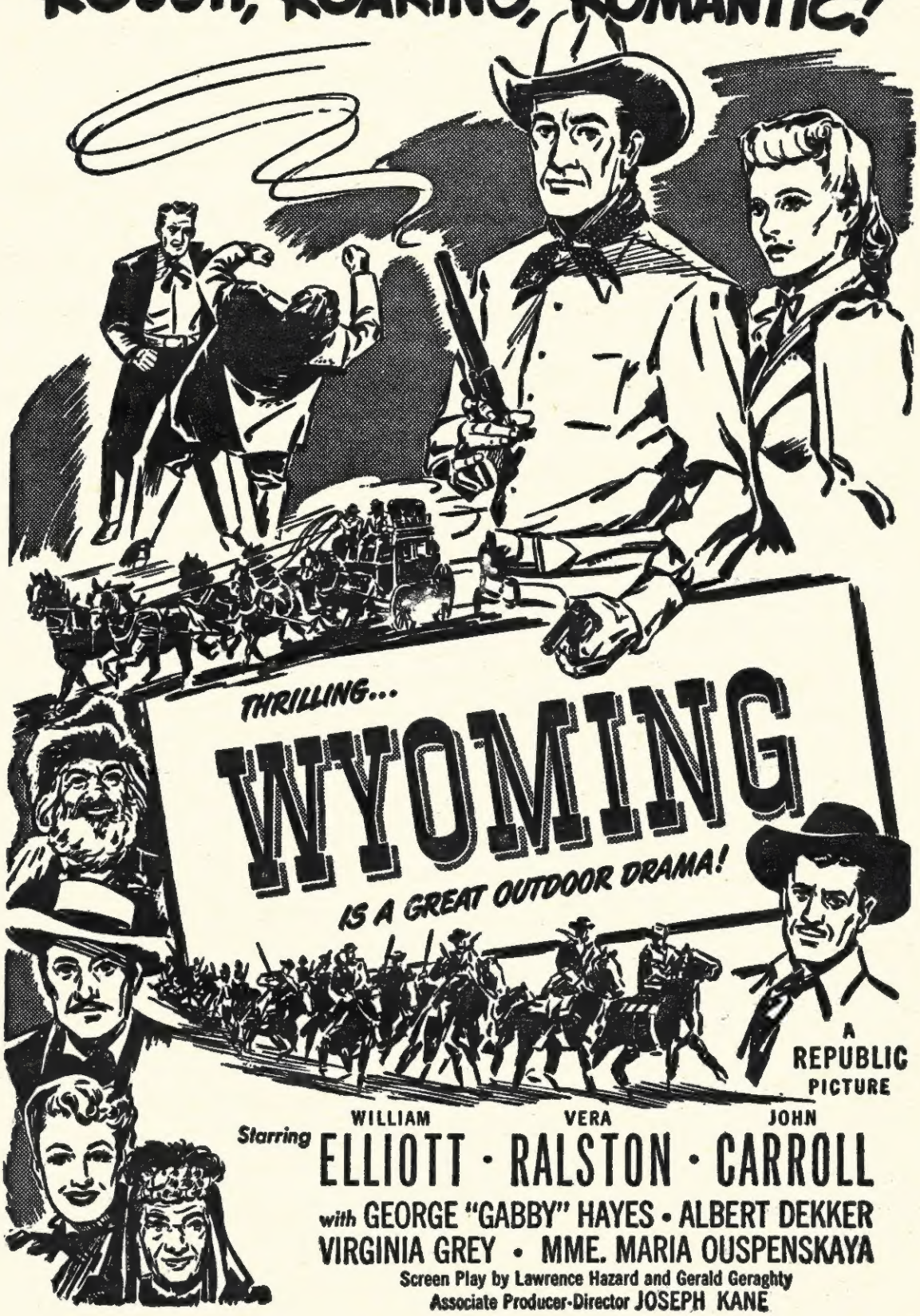

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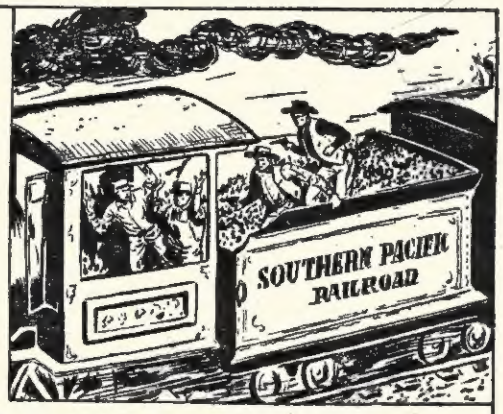
# COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

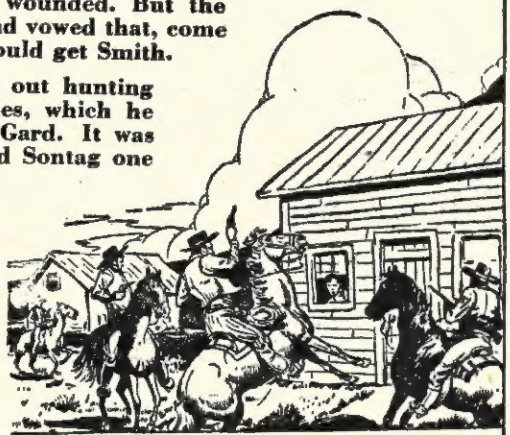
BY FOWLER AND CASE

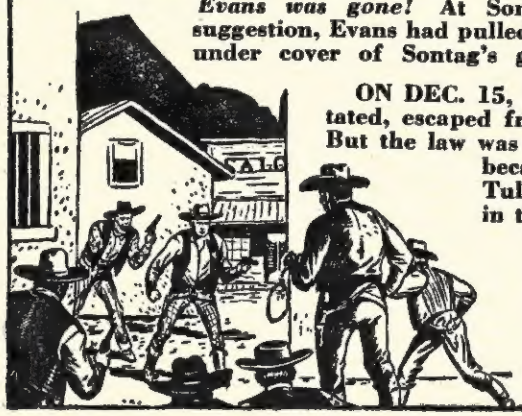
CHRIS EVANS was one of the most fearless gun-fighters in western history. Evans might have continued leading the life of a respected rancher at Visalia, California, but for his hatred of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Evans claimed the railroad had robbed Californians of millions of acres of land. He decided on reprisals. With a trusted hired hand John Sontag he boarded an S.P. train as it pulled out of Pixley. Sliding down the coal pile in the tender, the two jammed guns in the backs of the engineer and fireman. They then ordered uncoupling of baggage and express cars. Dynamite did the rest. A month later Evans and Sontag did a repeat performance which netted them $5000.



Arrival of John Sontag's brother, George, in Visalia, to assist in Evans' expanding operations, aroused suspicion of Big Bill Smith, Chief Railroad Detective. Smith and a deputy, White, followed George to Evans' ranch. A ruckus occurred. Evans, when White called his daughter a liar, knocked the man down with a bullet. John Sontag then appeared—with a sawed-off shotgun—and Smith and his wounded deputy ran. Then began the man-hunt. A posse of thirteen gunmen and two Apache scouts caught Evans and John Sontag in a lonely hideout cabin. Sontag was wounded. But the fugitives escaped and vowed that, come what might, they would get Smith.

UNNERVED, NOW, to hear that Evans was out hunting *him*, Smith organized a huge mob of vigilantes, which he placed under the leadership of a man named Gard. It was Gard, with twenty men, who ran into Evans and Sontag one morning as they were crossing an open wheat field. There were no conventional greetings. A broadside from the posse shattered Evans' left arm. Another shot knocked out his left eye. A third broke his right arm. Now it was Sontag who had to bear the brunt of the battle. Until nightfall, Sontag held off the posse, and when, finally, it did close in, *Evans was gone!* At Sontag's suggestion, Evans had pulled out under cover of Sontag's guns.





ON DEC. 15, 1893, Evans, one eye gone and one arm amputated, escaped from Fresno jail with a prisoner named Morrell. But the law was closing in. John Sontag had died, and Morrell became helpless with rheumatism. The sheriff of Tulare County caught Chris Evans and locked him in the Visalia jail. That night a lynch mob formed, and the sheriff told Evans, "Maybe we could beat 'em to Fresno. You game?" Evans was. The sheriff gave him his guns, and they sneaked out the back door. The lawman let Evans keep his guns until they reached Fresno because, as he said, "Evans, you're a man!"

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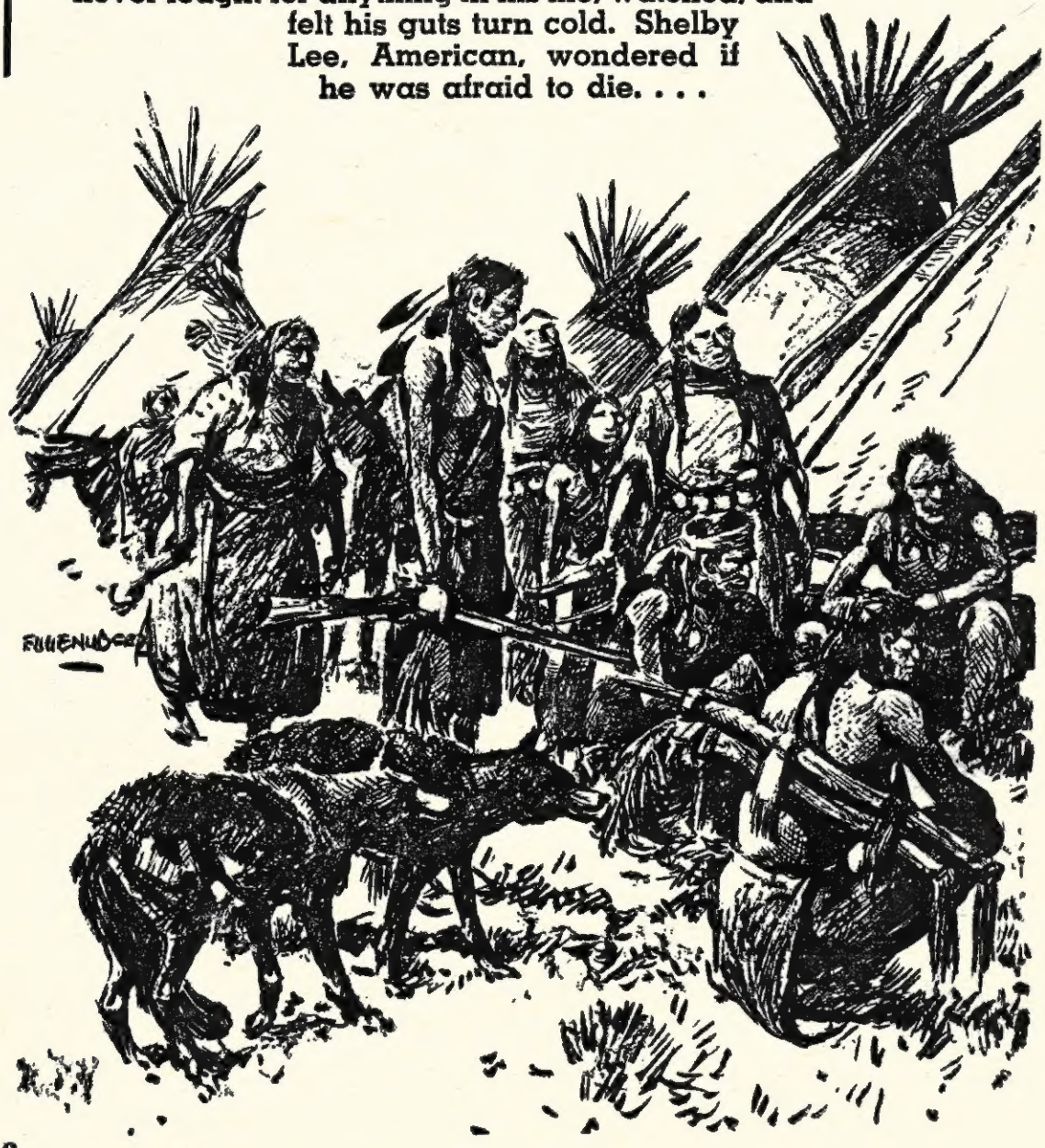
# ALAMO

**In the chill, gray dawn the sullen rumble of the Alamo's south guns answered the batteries which faced them. Soldiers of Mexico rushed forward, while over the old church waved a blood-red banner and Santa Anna's bands struck up the shrill notes of the *deguello*—no quarter. Then Shelby Lee, blue-blooded gentleman from Kentucky, who had never fought for anything in his life, watched, and felt his guts turn cold. Shelby Lee, American, wondered if he was afraid to die. . . .**



# ALAMO DEADLINE

## By Bob Obets

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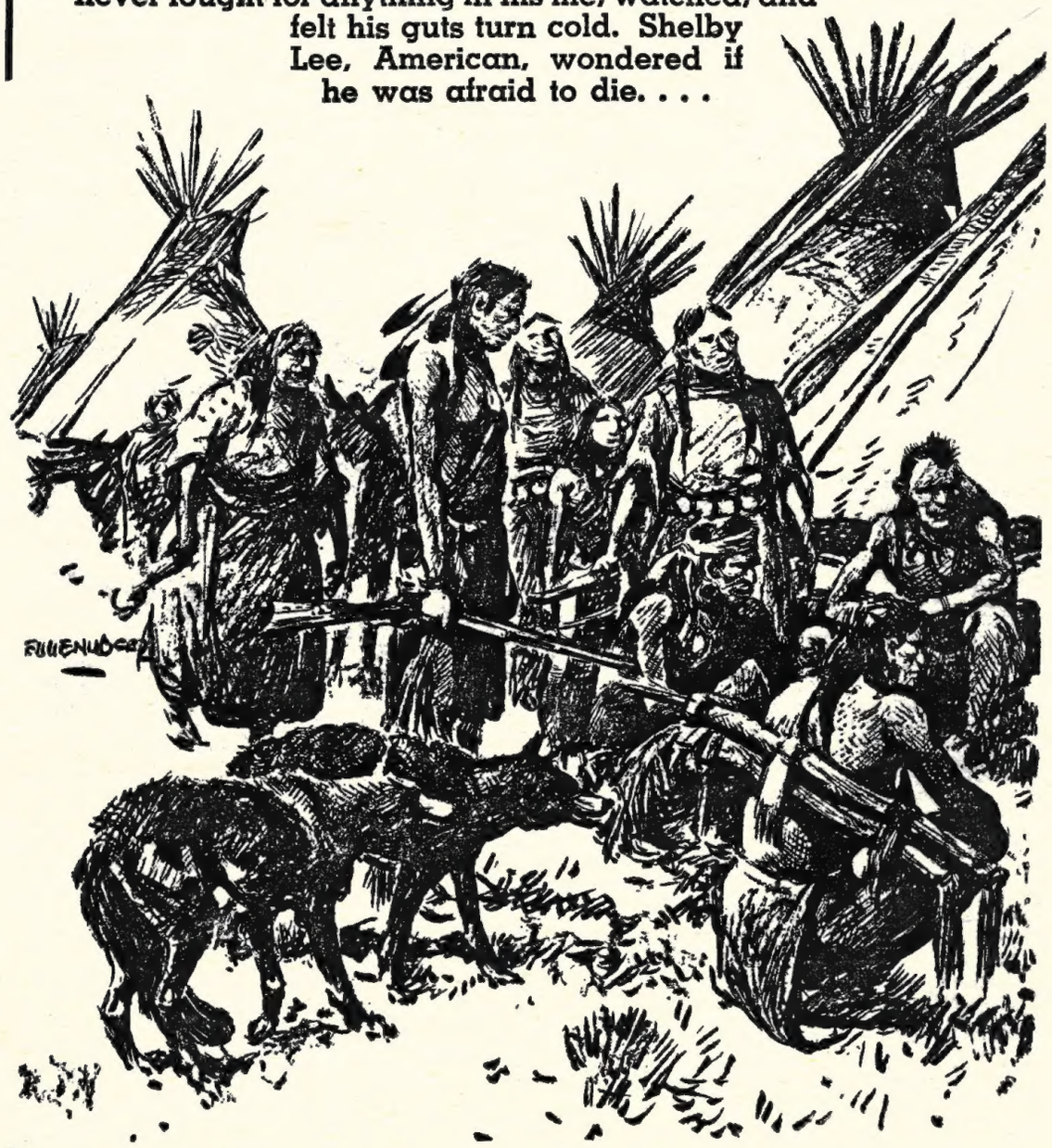


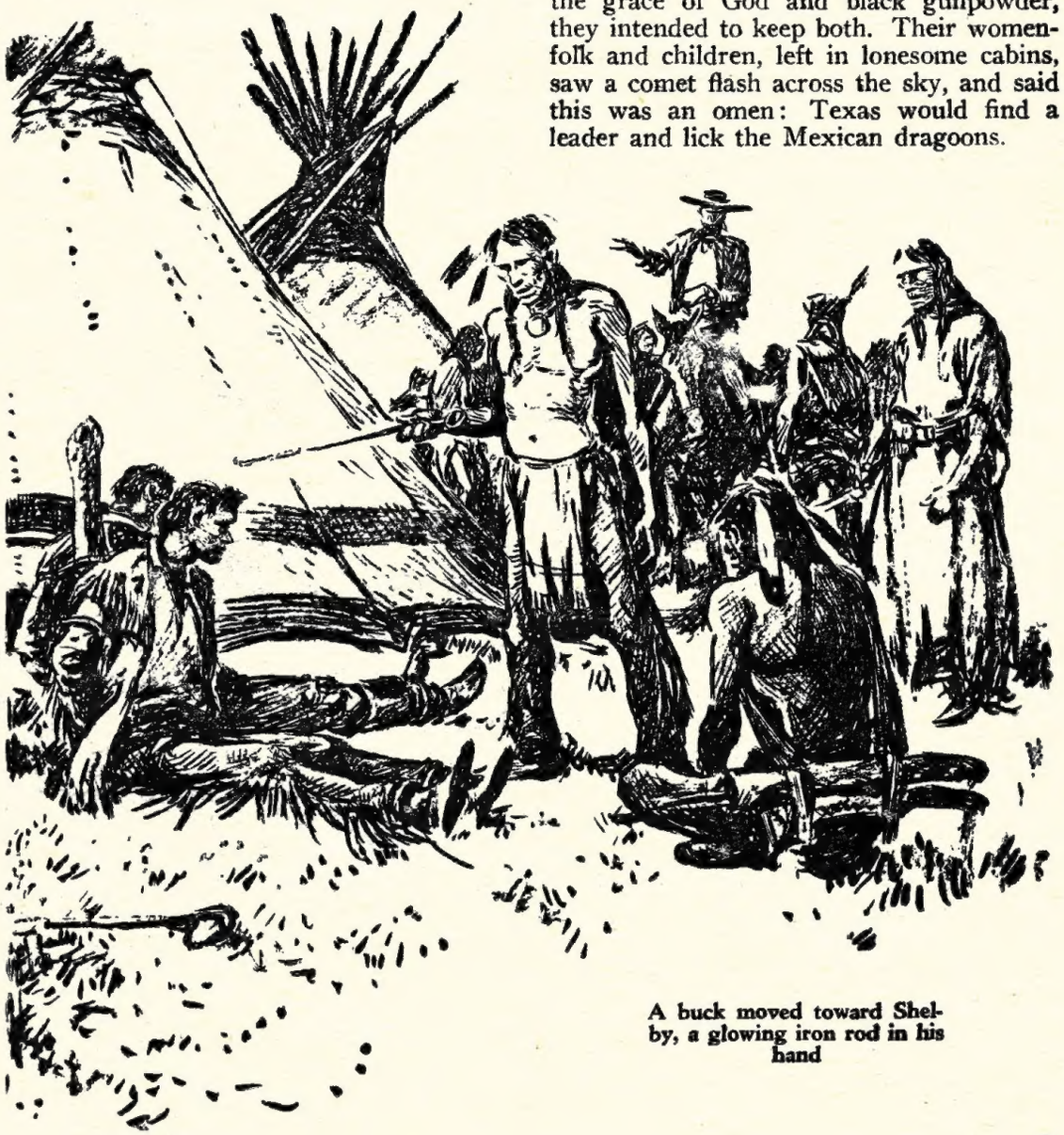


**Blood-Stirring Novel of the Pioneer Texas That Will Never Die**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Cannon Fodder for the Grays

WAR clouds hung over the land like battle smoke. Texas men valued their land and independence and, by the grace of God and black gunpowder, they intended to keep both. Their womenfolk and children, left in lonesome cabins, saw a comet flash across the sky, and said this was an omen: Texas would find a leader and lick the Mexican dragoons.



A buck moved toward Shelby, a glowing iron rod in his hand

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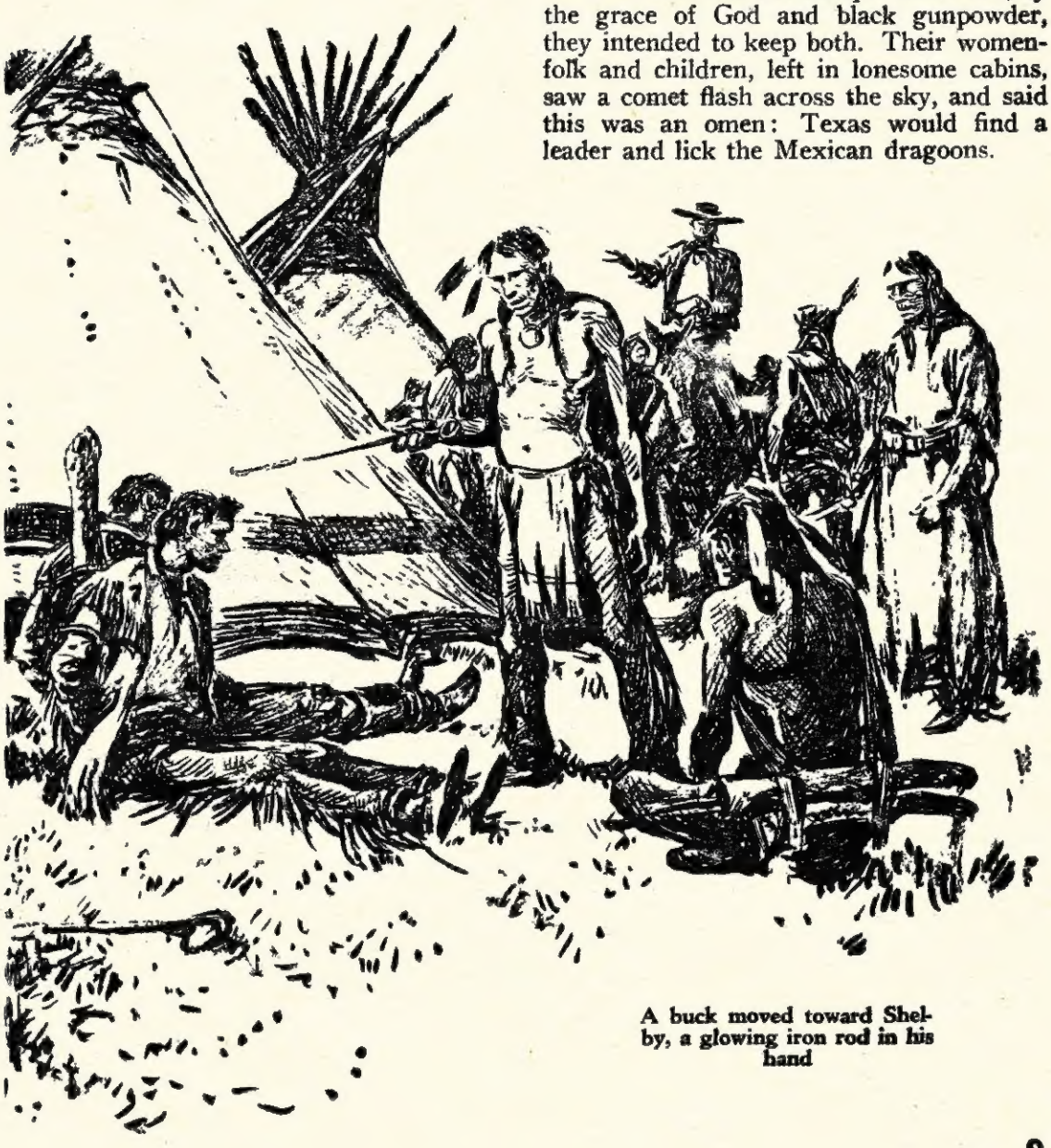


A buck moved toward Shelby, a glowing iron rod in his hand

But Texas' Man of Destiny had crossed Red River several years earlier, sloshing through the mud aboard a bob-tailed horse named Jack.

Brown-skinned Texans called him Don Samuel. White ones called him an adventurer, squawman and a lot of other things, including plain Sam.

He came to Texas, some claimed, with expense money from Andrew Jackson's private funds weighting his purse, his secret commission from Old Hickory being to secure Texas for the United States. Certain it is he carried in his buckskins a passport, signed by Acting Secretary of War John Robb, requesting "all the Tribes of Indians . . . to permit safely and freely to pass through their respective Territories, General Sam Houston, a citizen of the United States, thirty-eight years of age. . . ."

Certain it is, too, that in the autumn of 1835 Don Samuel took time off from his law practice in Nacogdoches to offer for sale four thousand acres of Red River land "cheap at $2500, $1000 in cash." The thing was, Don Samuel had a sword, the gift of an American Army officer, and he must pay for suitable habiliments to go with it. From New Orleans he ordered a uniform with a general's star and a sword sash. He had been commissioned "Commander-in-Chief of the forces" of the Department of Nacogdoches, and there was not a doubt in his mind but that soon he would be advanced to a higher post.

So shortly thereafter he sent a notice to New Orleans newspapers to the effect that volunteers were invited to join the Texas ranks "with a good rifle and 100 rounds of ammunition." They would receive liberal bounties of land. "Come soon . . . 'Liberty or Death!' "

One Don Adolfo Sterne, alcalde of Nacogdoches, added fuel to the fire Don Samuel's pronouncements touched off by offering to buy rifles for the first fifty recruits. The New Orleans Grays promptly claimed them. "Texas!" was on every tongue when two young men, from neighboring states, reached New Orleans. Both sought to join the elegant Grays. Both were destined to play a part in the struggle soon to make Texas a republic.

Dark-haired Shelby Lee, from Kentucky, was offered a lieutenant's commission, which he accepted with tongue in cheek. Young Lee's middle name was Beaumont, and you had only to look to know his blood was of the bluest. He accepted the commission because it offered a fast, easy way to reach Texas, and God knows what he would do when he reached that barbaric jumping-off place! For Shelby's trip was one of necessity. He often had chuckled at the standing joke of those times.

"G. T. T. Gone to Texas," Shelby Lee thought. He had left home fast and under a cloud, all right. But it wasn't any joke!

He hoped the man he had shot did not die. And, as God was his witness, he'd never have another affair with a double-tongued woman. Lord, he was going to miss the brandy juleps and the colored boys who brought them to him, and the cool veranda on his uncle's plantation. But one thing, put out with him as the colonel was, the old man had furnished him money. He wouldn't have to work! And, by the same token, he wouldn't have to pack a musket and have Mexicans shooting at him!

Women! He never wanted to look at another one . . . though that new uniform *would* set him off. . . .

THE redhead, with his grin and the glory of adventure shining in his eyes, was two years younger than Shelby Lee. His family name was O'Shane. Everyone called him Irish, and that he was, from the soles of his worn-out moccasins to the spot where the cow had licked him. He had just turned seventeen when he came floating down the Mississippi on the flatboat that had brought him from his native Tennessee.

He reached New Orleans, carrying with him a letter from his sister Melissa, now two years in Texas and married. The letter was written from "5 miles below Gonzales, on the Guadalupe," and it said:

*Dear Bro.*

*Your note rec'd & sad to hear about the death of our step pa & hope he repented before. But wish you would put off comeing for it sure looks like trouble with Mexkins (my husb. John rareing to go!) He removed here at start of De Witt colonie & so was able to get more land when we married. Mex gov't passed a new law that no gringos as they call us*

*can get free land now—but knoweing & loveing you if you are stuborn as a mule from Mo. will say if you do come our empresario will find some way to fix you up. Before the law of '30 a young man with a nice gyrl got a whole sitio (over 4000 acres) think of it! You better wait till John & boys lick them. Husb. baby & all well & baby looks just like. . . ."*

Irish O'Shane reached New Orleans the 13th of October. He wanted to see the sights of that town, so he washed up as best he could, slicked his cowlick. Couldn't spruce much. Moccasins worn-out, buckskins wet. Wicked town. Better take Butch and Bess along. . . .

With strange odors exciting him, yellow-skinned girls smiling invitingly and rubbing against him, he headed up-town. And even in the New Orleans of that day people turned to stare at the young man in greasy buckskins, with the long rifle under his arm and the eighteen-inch Bowie strapped to his belt. He came opposite a building brightly lighted, crammed with people. Some man told him it was Bank's Arcade, but the name meant nothing to him. He started on, when the man added, "They're organizing the New Orleans Grays. Boys that's going to Texas to help Sam Houston whip the—Hey! What's the rush?"

Irish shoved through the crowd, with more than the exertion making his heart pound. Texas! Sam Houston! Those were fabulous names to him. Ever since the days when his sister Melissa had taught him to spell out words, he had devoured every printed scrap he could find that mentioned Houston and Texas. For Texas always had been his land of adventure, Sam Houston, along with Old Hickory and Davy Crockett, his boyhood hero of Tennessee. Already, he could see himself in a fine gray uniform magnificently stained with crimson; he could hear Houston saying, "Suh, you are dying, but you led a charge that old Texas will long remember!"

A waspish voice broke in on his heroic imaginings. "What do you want, lad? We are busy here, as you can see."

Irish woke to the fact that he had pushed forward to where several men—elegant gentlemen, to him—sat behind a long table. He noticed now, too, that a number of dandies were moving aside as if to avoid contact with him and his greasy clothes.

"Well?" the voice said impatiently.

This man was sitting, so Irish couldn't size him up very handily. But he had keen eyes and a stubborn face, and he spoke with authority.

"I came to join the Grays," Irish blurted. "I got me a Bowie and a rifle, right here. Old Butch and Bess. And I know how to use 'em. Somebody said Cap'n Bob Morris—"

"I'm Captain Morris, the keen-eyed man interrupted him. "We're about full up, but—what do you think, Shelby?" He turned to the dark, immaculate young man at his right, who sat with the muster rolls before him. "He's a pretty rough-looking customer, ragged as a scarecrow. But pretty feathers don't make a fighting man, you know."

Lieutenant Shelby Lee, not yet in uniform, stared at O'Shane. "Butch and Bess, eh? I suppose you've shot a lot of rabbits, skinned out many a coon. And that makes you a fighting man!"

Some of the dandies tittered; this young lieutenant was quite a wag. Good connections, too!

O'Shane missed none of this. "Yes," he said stoutly. "And, devil take yo' eyes, I c'n skin you out'n that purty coat befo' you can say eawn bread!"

He dropped his right hand to the handle of old Butch, and Shelby Lee, his black eyes glittering, half rose from his chair. Then he dropped back, sighing.

"You see, Captain? Like the colonel always says, it's the blood that counts, whether it's in a race horse, a game rooster, or a fighting man. What kind of discipline could we expect, with uncouth fellows like that?"

"I suppose you're right, Lee," the captain agreed reluctantly. "Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie didn't come from such—but I see you're right in this instance. I'm sorry, lad. We have no place for you."

O'Shane swallowed. He blinked his blue eyes against a sudden, unaccountable mist. Then he had to make one more try.

He said, "Look, Captain. I know I ain't much spruced up. Been on the river, seems like, since Hector ate the pup. But my folks was fightin' men befor' ever they come over from the old—"

"My good lad," Shelby Lee said, "you

heard what Captain Morris said. "We have business to attend to. Will you leave, or shall I have the men throw you out?"

A bitter sob burst from the boy's throat. He was hurling himself forward when men grasped his arms. He slung them off, and more men grabbed him. His long rifle, the proudest of his possessions, clattered to the floor.

"Damn you, Shelby Lee!" he panted. "I'll go to Texas. I'll see you there. And when I do—"

They rushed him toward the front door. Old Bess was back there on the floor by the recruiting stand. Shelby Lee was back there. The last thing he heard, before the young hot-bloods tossed him into the street, was the suave, deprecating voice of Shelby Lee.

"You see, Captain?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Looie Without Braid

LIEUTENANT Shelby Lee cut a fine figure in his new uniform. One white-mustached old gentleman, watching him board ship with his company, Captain Bob Morris commanding, gave a nostalgic sigh.

"Ah'll declah, he's the spittin' image. Almost makes me wish his uncle, the C'nel, and me had the Battle of New Orleans to fight over again. Now, there, gentlemen, was a fightin' man. . . ."

A few days later the steamer sighted the wooden green Texas coast. A few days after that, while the ship was being searched, Captain Bob Morris was calling his new lieutenant a lot of things, but "spittin' image" was not one of them. The lieutenant could not be found.

Meanwhile, Irish O'Shane had spent his last dollars for a small journal and a mare mule of Spanish descent, wicked both of eye and disposition. He named the mule Hepsebeth, after a maiden aunt of his—God rest her bones—and by the time he had crossed the Sabine into Texas, by way of Gaines' Ferry, he hadn't decided which was the more stubborn. He confided to his journal, "See now why neither got maried. . . . Still raining."

He found Captain Gaines, who owned a tavern as well as the ferry, to be a hospitable man—within limits. The elderly captain fed him on corn pone and side meat, built up a good fire in the huge fireplace, and then, when Irish admitted to being a Democrat, a Jackson man and an admirer of Sam Houston, his host grabbed up a poker and ran him out into the rain. Said the Journal: "Spent cold night in wet stall with Hepsie . . . Never talk politiks with a stranger, partikler a John Quincy Adams man."

It kept raining. And this was El Camino Real—the King's Highway—two miserable ruts that led in a southwesterly direction, across flooded creeks and through a wilderness of post oak, hickory, pecan and loblolly pine. One gloomy afternoon, as he approached the Trinity, a forlorn traveler on a dejected mule, he broke through a thicket of underbrush and scrubby trees, mournfully festooned with Spanish moss, and Hepsebeth abruptly planted her feet, her ears went forward and she lifted her head with surprising alertness.

To the left of the boggy ruts they had been following, a partial clearing had been made, and in it stood a clapboarded cabin surrounded by girdled, dead live oaks. Smoke came from the cabin's two stone chimneys; all seemed peaceful, except for an occasional rumble of thunder. Still, when Irish kicked his heels into Hepsebeth's flanks, she refused to budge.

Irish was wet and miserable, the cabin was inviting. He gritted, "Hepsie! Now, you lissen to me, you miserable cross between a long-eared—"

Right then was when he began to long for his Kentucky rifle. He saw the bronzed figures over to his right, like shadows in the brush, and he thought regretfully of his Tennessee home. One big Indian, in buckskins, with a feather stuck in his hair, rose and stared in his direction, and a peculiar tingle ran along Irish's scalp. It was either turn and run, or make a break for the cabin. And Hepsebeth would go in neither direction.

"Hepsie," Irish declared, "I ain't no deserter, but right here is where you and me part comp'ny." He was swinging a leg over when a sight so strange that it made him blink came before his eyes.

A little long-eared Spanish mule, that might have been Hepsie's twin, trotted smartly into view, past the far end of the cabin. Behind the mule, holding onto a

halter rope, strode a dark-haired man in what looked like once might have been some kind of gray uniform. Behind the man came a girl in a blue dress, with the yellowest hair Irish had ever seen, holding before her a shovel upon which some coals smouldered.

The Indians, squatted in the brush like partridges, set up a caterwauling. The man in gray stopped, the mule stopped, and the yellow-haired girl handed the man the shovel. He motioned for her to go back, but, like Hepsebeth, she refused to budge.

Irish forgot his danger. The Indians forgot their bows and dogwood switches. As their heads popped up in curiosity, the brush began to bristle with feathers.

Strapped lengthwise of the mule's back, pointing past its long ears, was a metal cylinder about as long as Irish's leg and as big around as his thigh. The man held the shovel of coals near the rear of the cylinder. Irish saw one grinning Indian put thumb to nose in a derisive gesture that he certainly hadn't learned from his forefathers. Then flame and sound burst from the cylinder. It and mule both became a pinwheel—and Hepsebeth stampeded.

By the time Irish got his mule under control, there was not an Indian in sight. Hepsebeth trotted up and gazed inquiringly at the mule that lay on its back, atop the brass four-pounder, and when the dark-haired man in the tattered gray uniform gave the recalcitrant creature a vigorous kick in the ribs, both Hepsebeth and the down mule snorted.

The man looked up at Irish. "Don't just sit there! Can't you lend a hand?"

"I told you," Irish said. "I didn't think it'd be this soon, but I told you I'd see you in Texas, Lee."

He got down and Lee straightened, frowning.

THIS Shelby Lee might have been a caricature of the dapper lieutenant who had boarded the steamer at New Orleans. His uniform hung like scarecrow rags. His boots were so worn-out that mud and sand came through the holes and got between his toes. His money was gone; he never had felt so miserable in the whole of a sheltered and indolent lifetime. Once, he had gone without food for so long that he found himself wolfing down a settler's fat bacon, greens, corn pone, and good water.

At Indianola, where he had parted company with the New Orleans Grays, he had purchased a saddle horse and gear. He had headed for Nacogdoches, thinking to put as many miles between himself and the war zone as possible. Then he had run into a bunch of howling savages called the "Kronks." In a way, he had been lucky. The Kronks had taken his horse and money, but he had escaped with the hair still on his head—thanks to God and the darkness and some fast footwork. But he bore a wound over his short ribs, where an arrow had nicked him, that would trouble him for some time to come. And he bore an abiding and bitter grudge against Texas and all its people.

The very thought of that bull-train freight outfit, that he had hooked up with, made him sick. They must have crossed a million creeks, and not one with any bottom! Till the day he died, he was quite certain, he would wear callouses on his shoulders from heaving against those big wooden wheels. The day they hit Doe Run Creek, near Washington-on-the-Brazos, where one cart went clear out of sight, was when Shelby quit the freighting business. That was some fifty muddy miles and ten flooded creeks to southward of this cabin on the Trinity—a distance Shelby Beaumont Lee, sometime lieutenant of the New Orleans Grays, had covered on foot.

Texas! They could give it back to the Mexicans. The only bright spot he found in it was that young woman with the clean-limbed body of a thoroughbred, eyes clear and blue as the waters of the Mexico Gulf and sunflower yellow hair. She excited a man. If it wasn't for that double-tongued woman in Lexington; if she had bluer blood to go along with her yellow hair. . . .

Shelby couldn't understand Sabina Collins. When first he had set eyes on her, yesterday morning, she had been digging a grave.

Shelby heard the rasping sound of the shovel before he saw the girl. He had approached the Trinity by way of Spanish Bluffs; he was soaked to the skin because the ferry was abandoned, and he'd had to use a log for a raft. He broke through heavy underbrush, on the east bank, and heard the shovel scraping. He must have made a racket, for the next thing he knew

Sabina was staring at him. Her eyes were so dark blue they looked black; and steady and challenging as the rifle barrel she pointed at him.

She said, "You sneakin' redskin! Stop right there, before I blow your gizzard out!" Then she said, "Oh! I thought—"

So they stared at each other, a man and a woman, in the Trinity River bottom jungle, while the rain dripped mournfully from moss-bearded trees. So might Ug have gazed upon a woman, come on unexpectedly, in a cave mouth—except that, instead of a club and leopardskin, this woman held a rifle and wore a homespun dress that was too tight for her.

Shelby said, "I'm no redskin, no matter what I look like. Woman, put up that gun!"

"Oh," she said, "I—" Then she dropped the rifle, and tears popped into her eyes.

"Here," Shelby said gruffly, "what are you doing here? What's that hole for? Damn it, woman!"

She told him, then, how a few days ago her father had started to San Felipe, which was Steve Austin's settlement, on the Brazos. They needed tallow and a candle mold. Cow Collins figured to look for some shoes for her. "See," giving him a peek at her bare toes. But mostly he wanted to get the latest news about Sam Houston and the Texas Army.

"Pa, he was a Houston man from the grass roots down, and when he heard rumors our boys captured San Antonio de Bejar, without old Sam bein' on hand, pa was fit to be tied! Reckon you heard about that. Maybe you got in on it—you look like right smart of a fighteh."

Shelby shook his head.

"Well, way we got it, Ben Milam yelled, 'Who'll follow old Ben into San Antone?' And there was ten Mex'cans to every Texas boy! They followed old Ben and took the place by storm. Mighty good man, ol' Ben, mighty good man. Shot through the chest, just when they got the Mex'cans on the run. Poor old Ben . . . the New Orleans Grays were there, and I thought maybe you, with that gray outfit. . . ."

An old uniform, Shelby murmured, handed down from his father. "And what about all this digging?"

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, stooped to pick up the shovel. "I better get on with it. Like ma used to say, before the cholera morbus took her, 'When the's just one ox it has to bear the load.' Brother Cass and Brother Arch—one they call 'Little Cow'—they're down on the Warloupe, with Houston's army. And now the damned Injuns have—have—"

Shelby made a clucking sound, and immediately regretted it. For Sabina Collins, at this unexpected kindness, let the shovel drop, took two blind, staggering steps, grabbed him fiercely and put her head against his chest and bellowed.

"He ca-came home and f-fell off his mule. All night I s-sat up and I p-prayed and was scared the Injuns would come. I had to p-push the arrow through and then he—d-died. Oh, I wish I was a man! I wish I had every Injun and Mex'can in—"

"There," Shelby said, "I'm here. You're not alone now. I'll—I better get on with the digging."

Early this morning, while at the river, he had spotted bristling feathers—on the far bank, praise the Lord—and he had regained the cabin's shelter with perhaps half a bucket of the water Sabina had sent him to fetch. The Indians had crossed and all day had skulked in the brush, occasionally favoring the cabin with a flight of dogwood switches. Old Cow Collins, with a thought for just such a contingency, had built a log corral onto the back of his cabin. There, along with the old man's mule, Shelby had noted the small cannon, "borrowed," the girl explained, from the Mexican garrison, that time they had the trouble down at Anahuac. And, well, there was the mule and the cannon, a keg of black gunpowder, some old trace chains that could be cut up for shot. . . .

The Indians had scattered like quail, but likely they would be back. And now here was this red-headed young fellow, scowling at him, his Irish face somehow familiar.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Indian Stronghold

"DO I know you?" Shelby asked, meeting scowl with scowl. "Or perhaps you don't like the looks of my face."

"I know you," Irish said. "You're not wearin' that fine coat with ruffles, now, so I'll just have to skin you out'n the one you

got on. You ready?" He grinned nastily.

"Ready?" Shelby said—and right then was when the tree fell on him.

It must have been a tree. Surely nothing of less weight could have flattened him so handily! And to make a bad matter worse, he had to fall within range of his flying artillery—that damned mule, on her side and too stubborn to get up—and she kicked him with both heels. Shelby got up slowly, with what dignity he could muster.

"She ought to of brayed," Irish O'Shane said solemnly. Sabina snickered. Shelby Beaumont Lee spoke with that same measured politeness he once had heard the colonel use, under somewhat similar circumstances.

"Suh, if you were a gentleman it would be yo' choice of weapons. But no Lee, from Kentucky, ever stooped so low—"

"That," Irish put in, "sounds reas'nable. Never saw any critter stoop lower, 'less'n it was a shoat rootin' for acorns! You ready, Lee? Heah I come ag'in!"

Shelby was in a predicament. He could use a sword or a dueling pistol—a gentleman's weapons; but the colonel hadn't drilled him in such a low art as fisticuffs. No, firmness was the word—the way the colonel handled his colored boys.

"Look here, suh!" Shelby said. "Plain hoss-whippin' is too good for you! I've got a mind—"

A gentleman never gave ground, and Shelby would never have admitted to doing so; nor that he was relieved when Sabina Collins took a hand in the situation. One moment, a flaming-haired young fellow was coming toward him, all ruffed up like an angry tomcat. The next, Sabina's yellow head had come between them.

"You boys quit it!" she commanded. "Shelby, cut that fool cannon from off that mule animal's back. And you"—to Irish—"get your critter behind the cabin, in the stockade, before those plagued Injuns come back!"

"Yessum," Irish said, and started Hepsebeth toward the cabin.

* * *

Irish wrote in his journal, "Would of licked him but gyrl with hair like buter stoped me. . . . With gyrl like her could get sitio of land. Rememb. to tell Melissa. Expekt trouble with S. Lee."

The three spent that night in the cabin. There were two rooms with a dogtrot between; which poised a problem. Sabina, her nerves jumpy, solved this neatly.

"Just two ways Injuns could get in," she told them. "Irish, you put your pallet theah in the trot facin' east, and Shelby, you put yo's facin' west. I'll sleep in between, with pa's old rifle. That way it'll be handy for whichever needs it."

It appeared, though, that none of them was sleepy. They made down their pallets, and after a time Sabina said to the darkness, "Come morning, I'm going to saddle pa's mule and head for Gonzales. Maybe find brother Cass and brother Arch—that was Little Cow. Guess he's plain cow, now. Long trip for a lone female, mighty long trip. But when the ox is in the ditch, as ma used to say. . . ."

She let her voice trail wistfully; and after a time Irish growled, "You won't go by yourself. Come to think on it, that's where I'm a-headin'. Reckon sister Melissa will be there. Her husband—that's John Dickson—he won't. He'll be out fightin' Mex'cans, John will. What I aim to be doin', soon's I can git me a rifle and join up with some good outfit. I had a good rifle! Old Bess was the deadest-shootin'—"

"Now, Irish," Sabina chided gently—with a new warmth in her voice, Shelby noted. "Allus rufflin' yo' feathehs! What you want is to find Sam Houston. Provisional Govern'ment elected old Sam Commander-in-Chief of the Texas Army—on November 3'rd, it was—and he's a first-class fighting man. It's a pity," she added pointedly, "mo' good men don't join up with him. Which way are you headin', Shelby?"

"Why," Shelby said, surprising even himself, "to Gonzales. Hold a commission, in fact, in the New Orleans Grays. Went ashore at Indianola to—uh, look for some deserters. Kronks jumped me. When I got loose from 'em, my outfit had gone. Hooked up with a freight outfit, and—here I am. It was"—and here he put real feeling in his voice—"a sore disappointment not to be beside old Captain Bob Morris when they stormed San Antonio."

"I'm sure it was," Sabina said softly. "I knew you were a fighteh!"

And not a word about the gray uniform handed down from his father.

Irish O'Shane growled, "You couldn't

fight Mex'cans. They're not gentlemen enough to suit yo' taste."

"Look here," Shelby said, rising from his pallet, "when you speak to me, or about me, you'd better—"

"Now, boys," Sabina said.

It was going on daylight when some noise woke Sabina. All she could hear was Shelby's snoring; Irish O'Shane, like a fretful child, babbling something about General Sam. In the darkness her lips curved in a smile. The thought came to her that perhaps, some way, the mules had escaped. No use to disturb the boys. She got up quietly, clutching the long rifle, stepped across O'Shane and went out into the gray night.

Before she could cry out, a hand was clapped over her mouth. Greasy bodies closed in from every side. She was still struggling when, from the cabin, came a sharp cry. Horror laced through her. Shelby or Irish? At a time like this, a woman knew her own heart. Her man was in there, and though he might be a snob, a blackguard, a coward, she would love him for all of time. . . .

PICTURE, then, Texas in those times: Along with Steve Austin, the steady one recently returned from two years in Mexico City's dungeons a dying man, stalwarts like Jim Bowie, William B. Travis, and Davy Crockett were growing to prominence, their names, with Ben Milam's, soon to become legendary. Mexico, herself, was in turmoil while Santa Anna established himself; perhaps Mexico's colonial policy was unwise. The colonists thought it was. And when they saw import duties levied upon them, their slaves set free, their friends from the States forbidden to settle in Texas, trouble naturally followed.

A skirmish at Anahuac, where some forty-two Mexicans and seven Texans were killed and the "Turtle Bayou Resolutions" were adopted; a set-to at Gonzales, over a six-pound cannon, spiked and practically useless. The clans gathered on the Guadalupe and Milam led them into San Antonio; when Bejar fell, many Texas men thought the war was over. Sam Houston was not such a one. From New Orleans he ordered, "300 Yagers, 1000 butcher knives, 1000 tomahawks well tempered with handles, 3000 lb. chewing tobacco (Kentucky), 100 Scott's Infantry Drill. . . ." and so on.

When one Dr. Grant stole his army, and started a *quasi*-filibustering expedition into Old Mexico, the Commander-in-Chief rode from Washington-on-the-Brazos, determined to stop such foolishness. "I do not fear—I will do my duty!" The Mexicans, Sam was convinced, would seek revenge for the fall of Bejar. He sent a handful of men to San Antonio with instructions—never carried out, to Texas' sorrow—to demolish the fortifications at the Alamo. And even then, in the dead of winter, Santa Anna was moving an army northward across the bleak desert that lay between Saltillo and Bejar.

So consider Sam's position: He had been a major-general, a congressman, and governor of a great State. Trouble with his wife Eliza, who would not live with him, would not divorce him, had caused him to renounce his governorship and many of his friends, along with it. And, seeking forgetfulness, he had gone to live among the Indians, where for a time he had found solace in the companionship of tall and lovely Tiana Rogers and his barrels of Old Monongahela. But these things were only sedatives; when they wore off, Sam's anguish must have been acute. Only Andrew Jackson, really, kept faith in him. Old Hickory helped to fire in Sam's soul a new ambition, burning bright when Sam came to Texas. Who could tell? The man who secured that land for the United States might live to be President!

A bright comet flashing across the sky. Texas' Man of Destiny. . . .

Sam Houston had his hours of darkness. One was when he rode from Refugio, away from Dr. Grant, the man who had stolen his army, not knowing whether he had convinced the Texans of the folly of their expedition. Because, caught up with other business, he had not been present when San Antonio fell. He was in disrepute with the Texas Army—his army. Like all strong men, he had his enemies; and perhaps that afternoon, when he left Refugio, both his spirits and his renown were at lowest ebb.

Next evening he told Hockley, his aide, "I will mark a new track. I will set Texas free. Nothing shall stop me!"

Back at San Felipe de Austin, Sam Houston talked things over with Henry Smith, the man Texas folks had made their

first governor. Santa Anna, missing no bets, had his agents stirring up a couple thousand Indians; and what with them and his dragoons, he expected to bring Texas colonists to their knees, fast. But Santa Anna reckoned without Co-lon-neh, the Raven. Sam Houston thought like an Indian. Young Cherokee braves had taught him the green corn dance; he was the adopted son of a Cherokee chief, and in Texas Chief Bowl was war lord of that tribe. Governor Smith gave his commander a furlough, and Sam Houston disappeared among the Indians.

SHELBY LEE'S head was throbbing; he lay perfectly still. Remembrance came back to him, horror, fear, sickness. It seemed incredible. All of it, since the night in Lexington when that fellow Jules Matthews had come bursting into Margo's room. Crude fellow, Jules, but he seemed sincere. "You co-zening 'ristocrat! Wouldn't be so bad if you loved Margo. . . ."

He hadn't, though. It was shoot Jules Matthews or be shot, but he hadn't loved Margo. Funny. Guessed he never had loved anybody. *Mighty* funny. Shoved down here in a place God had forgot, apt to be led out of this wigwam, or whatever it was, and killed, and he kept thinking about a girl with hair yellow as sunflowers and a pert way of smiling—a girl who could mean nothing to Shelby Beaumont Lee, of the Kentucky Lees. God, if anything had happened to her!

He must have groaned, for beside him O'Shane asked, "Lee, you all right?"

"I'm fine!" Shelby said. "I'm just dandy. My head split. Trussed up like—"

"You ain't dead," Irish reminded him. "That's sump'n!"

Two big buck Indians came in. One leaned over Shelby, grinning, a knife in his hand. To die like this, Shelby thought. He shut his eyes, already feeling the cold steel in his vitals, trying to remember the prayers of childhood. The big buck grabbed a handful of his hair and made a circling motion with the knife, holding the back of the blade against Shelby's scalp. The Indian put a moccasined foot against Shelby's chest, gave his hair a yank and said, "Thock!" Then both Indians chuckled.

Grasping their prisoners under the arms, they hauled them outside. Yelling squaws promptly closed in. Bucks and squaws both set up a terrific din. One fat old woman threw herself on Shelby. She pinched him, slapped him, boxed his ears and wallowed with him, all the while making grunting sounds. Finally, with a wicked-looking knife, she began shingling his hair. She was so rough with her barberwork that occasionally she gouged out a piece of scalp. Blood trickled down Shelby's face and neck; he struggled desperately. Then a big fellow with yellow circles painted around his eyes, wearing a bright feather bonnet, spoke. The two white men were lashed, back to back, to a stake. A buck moved toward Shelby, a glowing iron rod in his hand.

The squaws, the bucks, the sniffing dogs and the scattering of hide-covered tepees, began reeling. The last thing Shelby saw, before blackness hit him, was a giant of a man in buckskins, the look of eagles in his eyes, riding forward on a clean-limbed sorrel.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Couriers of Doom

IRISH O'SHANE wrote in his journal: "Did not know if indians redy to brand me or punch eyes out when Sam Houston rode into a camp. Him & Chief Eyes like Eagle had big pow-wow. Swetted some!! Finalie all—S. Lee the fine gyrl and me—dragged to chiefs wigwaum. . . . Sam there & never saw more fine hansom lookeing man. One of them flat Meskin hats & short jacket with much silver—eyes look threw you & big! Never saw man so big! Chief made lot of uglie jesturs & Sam seamed to swell up. Finalie Sam run hand over gyrls hare & could see he was ladies man. Layde down law to Chief Eyes like Eagle & that was about all. Fed us meat which I did not know what it was. Taste good but tuff. Goeing on to Gonzales!"

They left the Indian camp that morning, with Sam Houston, on his sorrel, leading the way, Sabina riding Hepsebeth, and Shelby and Irish walking. Whatever promises or inducements Sam had employed to obtain the prisoners' release, he never revealed; he apologized for the absence of Pa Collins' mule. "In a way,

now, we are all traveling on the critter's strength. I find mule meat a bit stringy but satisfyin'. Chief wasn't expecting me, he said, or he'd have fattened up a dog."

Shelby, looking a bit greenish, said, "You mean . . ."

"Yes," Sam said gravely, "I'm afraid I do."

They halted for several minutes, while Shelby was sick.

Late that evening they reached a deserted cabin which Sam said belonged to the Sorrel boys. "Mighty good boys, Roany and Pete, both. At Goliad now with C'nel Fannin. A bunch of the New Orleans Grays there, too." He shot a look at Shelby's tattered uniform.

Shelby started explaining again how come he had parted company with the Grays. Something in Sam's eyes stopped him.

"Suh," he said, "I knew yo' uncle, the C'nel, when I was a shave-tail lieutenant, stationed at New Orleans. It's a pity, suh, that mo' of his blood doesn't flow in yo' veins. For I know all about you. I saw Captain Bob Morris—now Major Morris—at Goliad, and he told me the whole unfortunate story. You are a scoundrelly deserter, and hoss-whippin' would be too good for you!"

Irish, Sabina—they were all staring at him. The hurt in Sabina's eyes cut like a knife.

"Shelby!" she gasped. "Tell him it's not true! There's been some—"

Shelby shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sabina." His lips twisted. "I never came to Texas to get myself killed, or play the hero. I came because the law was after me for shooting a man, in Lexington. I wouldn't lift a finger to fight for Texas, if they gave me the whole place. It isn't that I'm a coward. It's simply—"

"I know," she said. "I can see right through you, Shelby Lee. You never did a lick of honest work in your life. Never fought for anything, struggled for anything. I'd rather be poor as a church mouse! I know if I ever have anything I'll have to fight and work for it, and then it will be worth having. Shelby, I'm sorry for you. I pity you. I—oh, damn you, Shelby!"

She ran out into the dusk, sobbing.

"Lee!" Irish burst out. "Hurtin' her like that—I could wring yo' neck!"

"I think, son," Houston murmured, "it has been wrung. But befo' I hit the shucks, I want to read you part of a letter, Shelby, written to Governor Smith by C'nel Travis, in command at the Alamo. I don't have to read it, for though I copied it word for word, that letter is engraved on my heart. Travis knows, and I know, that large fo'ces are advancing on San Antonio, from the south. Travis pleads for the Texas people to forget party strife, to rally on the frontier; but he fears we are all asleep.

" 'The thunder of the enemy's cannon and the pollution of our wives and daughters—The cries of famished children and the smoke of burning dwellings, will only arouse Texans. . . .' That, suh, is what Travis writes, and he begs for mo' men. We all have to fight, or go under. You say you would not fight for such a place, yet Texas was good enough to give you sanctuary. You say you would not fight, yet Texas is the home of a fine girl who loves you. Yes, Shelby Lee, she does, and I want you to think of that. I shall say no more. Good night, and God guide you."

Shelby didn't sleep much. He was awake when Sabina came back in and lay down on the pallet Irish had made for her out of corn shucks and a pair of saddle blankets. He was awake a couple of hours later, when Sabina spoke low, wretched words in the darkness.

"Why, God, why did I have to love him?"

Near Shelby, in the dogtrot, Irish O'Shane was fighting some imaginary grand battle.

Shelby's mind was like a muddy pool. Nothing was clear. A man should be true to himself, to his own ideals. Suppose Sabina did love him? A number of women had loved Sam Houston; women Sam had left, women who still grieved. Well, he owed his allegiance to Old Glory, to the United States, and no woman could ever change him. Nor could Houston pull the wool over his eyes. All this talk of burning dwellings and famished children! The whole thing was a hoax. Hadn't they booed Sam out of a theater in Cincinnati? "Turn him out! . . . Female purity!" Yes, and Andrew Jackson felt himself slipping. Sent Sam down here, and between them they had cooked up a neat plan. Win Texas,

take her into the Union, and both get their names up.

But Sabina, what had she to gain? She had lost her father, her two brothers were fighting for Texas—why? Damn the place! He had suffered enough in Texas, and he wished he'd never heard of it.

Shelby dropped into fitful sleep, thinking about his uncle, the colonel. Had told the colonel to write him at San Felipe or Gonzales. Maybe a letter was waiting in Gonzales. Maybe the colonel had fixed it so he could go home. God, what wouldn't he give for a cool brandy julep!

LATE in the evening, next day, they reached the Brazos. There Houston left them, turning eastward toward Washington. There O'Shane found the words for the glory that was in his heart.

"General Sam, suh, I know I haven't any horse, nor even a rifle, but if you'll have me I want to join yo' army. Just want to see my sister, Melissa—that's Mrs. John Dickson—at Gonzales. I came to Texas to make it my home, and I want to fight for it."

"God bless you, son," Sam said and, surprisingly, tears came in his eyes. "You see Captain Al Martin, at Gonzales. He'll be glad to have you. Yo' brother-in-law, John Dickson, is a lieutenant in my army, and it is men like him—like you, son—that will win this fight."

Sam was down off his horse. He pulled O'Shane to him and kissed him on the cheek. "I salute you, suh, in the name of Texas!"

There were tears in O'Shane's blue eyes, too, and Shelby Lee could not understand any of this. Sabina was all choked up, and she said, "Sam—Sam—" Then Houston swept off his hat in a gallant gesture. He said. "Perhaps I shall see you soon, ma'am, in Gonzales."

They watched him ride away, a commanding figure with the red sun against his back, Texas' Man of Destiny. . . .

They pressed on, two men walking and the girl riding a mule. They were on the old San Antonio Road now, and they began to meet people, afoot, on horseback and in ox carts; for the weaker-hearted already were fleeing northward toward the Red and the Sabine. There was talk that an army now encircled Travis and his men in the Alamo. General Urrea, it was rumored, was closing on Fannin, at Goliad, and all Texans not Mexican born were to be put to the sword.

When they reached Gonzales they found a huddle of mud buildings on the bank of the Guadalupe; at the store where they stopped O'Shane asked about Captain Al Martin. The captain, he was told, was "out on the flats" drilling his men.

There was a letter for Shelby, from the colonel. It said:

*". . . Bourbon, cards and loose women do not make a good mixture, but by a happy circumstance the man you shot did not die. You can come home now. . . ."*

*Come home!* Shelby had not a thin dime, no horse, nothing. John Dickson, his wife Melissa, and her fifteen-months-old baby, Angelina, and Irish O'Shane's folks, were with Travis' men, in the Alamo. Sabina's brothers, Cass and Arch, were in the Alamo, and each day the news grew worse. The Mexican lines were tightening about the Alamo.

Shelby Lee wanted to get away from it all. From the fearful, strained faces of the women who asked each scout, "Can you still hear the cannon? Does the Alamo still stand?" And from the men who watched him with hostile eyes; from Sabina Collins, who would not speak to him; from O'Shane, who held him in contempt. He had slept on a dirt floor, in a miserable shack; hadn't a fresh change of clothes to his name, and he had eaten so much side meat he could grunt like a pig! What he most wanted in the world was a horse. With a horse, he could reach Anahuac or Indianola. Boats left those places for New Orleans, and, God willing, Shelby intended soon to be aboard one of them.

The day the courier came from the Alamo, Shelby had strolled down to the river bend, where O'Shane and a few dozen men were drilling, under Captain Martin. They had a flag some of the Gonzales women had made—a breadth of white cotton with a black cannon in the center, a Lone Star above the cannon and below it the bold challenge to "Come and Take it."

The flag was a hold-over from that first skirmish at Gonzales; Shelby Lee thought the whole thing a little ridiculous. The

"army" for the most part wore buckskins, some being new and soft and yellow, while others had become black and shiny. Some of the men wore shoes, some moccasins; wide-brimmed sombreros bobbed along beside coonskin caps, with the tails down behind. The distant clamor set up by Mr. John Sowell, banging lustily against a length of iron, in front of his blacksmith shop, put an end to the drill, and all the men went running.

They gathered in front of the smithy, and Andrew Ponton read Travis' heroic message, asking for immediate aid at the Alamo, aloud. They were a ragged bunch, these Texas men; tears came in more than one pair of eyes.

Alcalde Ponton spoke earnestly. "Boys, there's no time for further drilling. Captain"—to Martin—"when can you have your men ready to march? If the Alamo falls, Santa Anna's army will be at all our throats!"

Martin declared he could march within the hour, if necessary; whereupon Ponton called for volunteers for couriers.

"We've got to send the word up and down the river, to all the settlements!"

Men looked at one another, hesitating, until finally Irish O'Shane spoke up.

"Mr. Ponton, we all want to fight!"

Sabina Collins pushed forward then, her eyes flashing, her face set in determined lines.

"I'll ride for you, Mr. Alcalde, if Irish there will loan me the use of his mule! That's one way I can do my part."

"God bless you, girl!" Andrew Ponton said huskily.

O'Shane looked at Sabina, with his whole heart in his eyes. "Take the mule," he said. "Take anything I own."

It was then that Shelby Lee, his heart pounding, murmured in his politest voice: "I'd gladly help you, Mr. Ponton—if I had a horse."

"Do you mean that, sir?" Ponton asked, turning to face Shelby. "Maybe I've misjudged you."

"I mean it," Shelby said. "All this bloody business at the Alamo . . . it has changed me, sir. It makes my blood boil."

"You shall have a horse, Shelby Lee—my private saddler. Ride down-river and tell all the settlers to gather here, in Gonzales. . . ."

Thirty minutes later, Shelby headed eastward, down the old Warloupe, on an easy-gaited sorrel mare. He came opposite the blacksmith shop, and he was thinking about Sabina when he saw her yellow head moving toward him through the dusk. She came from the store building, next the smithy, and stopped at his stirrup.

She said, "I'm *glad*, Shelby. I knew there was some good in you; dear God, I love you so!"

And she whirled and went running; and there was Irish O'Shane, in the shadows, his boyish face white.

Aware that Shelby had seen him, he lifted a hand in salute as Shelby touched the mare with spurs.

A few more minutes, and Irish O'Shane would be on the march to San Antonio, with Al Martin's men; Sabina Collins, riding a little Spanish mule named Hepsebeth, would be jogging up-river to bring in the settlers. Shelby wondered if he would ever see either of them again. He wondered at the sadness that settled like a great weight on his heart. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Dragoon Captors

SHELBY rode through the night, stopping by each cabin to shout, "Halloo!" Some of them stood dark and deserted; barking dogs usually told him when one was occupied. A voice shouting, "Ring! Tige! You dogs hesh that caterwaulin', you heah me!" A dim light that glinted on gun steel as a man in pants, barefooted, or a woman with kids behind her, appeared at the door.

They took the news in various ways. Most of the men cursed the Mexicans, Santa Anna in particular. One woman, with youngsters peeping around each side, pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, said in muffled, anguished tones, "My boy's in the Alamo. My oldest. My man is somewhere with Fannin." Then she lifted her chin in a fierce way. "But they'll come through all right. My men are fighters. Won't you 'light down while I warm the coffee?"

Shelby began to get a better understanding of these people who had come to Texas to make their homes. They were fighters,

whatever else! He rode on, a chill west wind bringing a sound like distant thunder in the night. He wondered if, from here, he could hear the guns at the Alamo.

Dawn's faint red showed ahead, and he hadn't passed a cabin in the past ten miles. Well, he had warned them. He could send money back to Andrew Ponton for the mare. All he had to do was follow this river, and he would reach the coast. . . . Irish O'Shane would be on his way to the Alamo; what was it Sabina had said? Something about anything worth having being worth fighting for. Something about being sorry for a man who had never fought for anything, or struggled, or worked.

Shelby stopped the mare, turned his head to the wind and listened. Feeling a little foolish, he got down and pressed his ear against the ground. He had heard somewhere that Indians used such a trick to determine sounds or vibrations from miles away. He couldn't hear anything. Guessed there wasn't anything to it. Foolish to think a man could hear cannon fire, this far away.

He rode another mile, slowly, with queer thoughts whirling through his head. Sabina was right. Anything worth having was worth fighting for—but this God-forsaken land wasn't worth having. He had never fought much, or struggled, or worked, but he hadn't needed to. . . . Where was Sabina now? If the Alamo fell, both her brothers in it, what would she do? She would be alone, no menfolk, no one to look after her. Brave girl. She could be beautiful in the right clothes; make a wife a man could be proud of. And she thought of him now. It might be—it just might be that he could talk her into going with him. Leaving this savage place. Why, that was what he wanted! That was what he wanted more than anything in the world! A queer, choked sound came from deep inside him. He whirled the mare and drove in the spurs.

The mare was staggering when he rode back into Gonzales. Shelby staggered a bit, too, after he managed to haul himself from saddle. Settlers came hurrying from the blacksmith shop and other buildings; they gathered around, and now they were friendly to Shelby. When his stiffened legs failed him, men caught his arms. A big, bearded fellow offered a bottle gourd; Shelby took a long swallow of the liquid it contained, gasped and coughed, and fire was in his mouth. The shock ran clear to his toes.

"Tilt 'er ag'in, son. Hit'll stren'then you," the donor advised.

"Sabina Collins!" Shelby gasped. "She got back yet?"

"She ain't here, son," Ponton told him. "Not that girl! When I decided to send a man up-river, she said well, then, she had two brothers in the Alamo. They'd need women for nurses. She headed out on her mule, with Al Martin and them."

Shelby took a step forward, said hoarsely, "And you let her go!"

He turned, almost fell and staggered back to the saddle mare. Ponton called, "Hold on, boy! That mare's in no shape and neither are you!" Others tried to stop him, but Lee wouldn't listen.

"Pay me for the mare?" Andrew Ponton shook his head. "Guess I know how you feel. Here, I'll help you up—and God go with you, boy. . . ."

Shelby Lee crossed the river and pushed on westward until dusk, when the mare could go no farther. He watered her at a creek, heavily wooded on each bank. After

TOPS FOR QUALITY
BIGGER AND BETTER
A

he had shucked off the saddle and staked the animal out to graze, he took a few bites of cold biscuit and bacon a Gonzales woman had given him. Weary clear to his bones, he stretched out on his saddle blanket, his head resting against the saddle, and was promptly asleep.

MORNING sunlight, filtering through the live oak leaves, woke him. He sat up to find himself staring at a unit of blue-clad Mexican dragoons. Seven or eight of them, smoking corn-husk cigarettes, their brown faces grinning as they eyed him. A scouting party, he guessed, waiting just to enjoy his surprise at sight of them!

One, wearing a black mustache, planted himself before Lee and began speaking in Spanish. All Lee could do was shake his head. More words. Questions. When he couldn't answer, the fellow suddenly slapped him across the face. Three of them grabbed him, then. They hauled him over to a stout young tree, yanked his arms around its trunk, and soon had his wrists lashed together.

The man with the mustache drew his pistol. He leveled it at Shelby's midriff, slowly pulled back the hammer. Shelby made a silent plea. "Please, Lord, for Sabina. . . ." Then, as if he couldn't make up his mind, the Mexican lowered the pistol and fired more questions.

This cat-and-mouse business continued. Sweat popped out on Shelby; he was beginning to wish the fellow would fire and get it over with, when the dragoon barked a command. Before Shelby could realize his good fortune, the whole bunch had mounted and gone bucketing away. They figured, he supposed, to return later for him, or else they thought wild beasts would finish him in short order.

Shelby struggled all that day. He twisted and yanked until the thongs cut blood from his wrists, and that blood was what finally freed him. The thongs were of rawhide, which the blood softened gradually. But his troubles were just beginning. He kept thinking about Sabina, with the dread that the Alamo might have fallen heavy in his mind. The discovery that, somehow, the saddle mare had broken loose and strayed off made him physically ill. He tried to trail the mare, forgetting that this was wild, strange country and that he wasn't a woodsman. He got lost and wandered for two days, existing on wild berries and bird eggs. He might have perished but for the wrinkled Mexican, out hunting coons and other small game. The Mexican's dogs put Shelby up a tree; he was roosting there like a lonesome and bedraggled gobbler, when the hunter came up.

Right then, Shelby gained a new understanding of the Mexican people. There were good ones and bad ones, just as in any race; and this old man was a prince. He fed Shelby, doctored his scratches, while his buxom wife mended the rents in Shelby's tattered garments.

The old man let Shelby have a burro, giving him to understand by many gestures that, when he reached "Bejar," he must give the burro a slap and he would return home. He used a bit of charred wood to draw a map of Shelby's route, shook his head sadly, crossed himself and murmured words which Shelby took to be, "Go with God."

Many weary miles later, at sundown, Shelby and his patient burro heard a rumbling. Lee's heart gave a tremendous bound. The cannons! The cannns were still firing! The Alamo had not fallen!

A sort of weakness came over him; he got down and rested his forehead against the burro's sweaty brown back. For the first time in years, Shelby uttered a sincere prayer.

". . . For she is a fine, brave girl, Lord; much too good for me. Beautiful in a queen's gown or in filthy rags. And remember Irish, too, and protect him; it was boys like him who won this nation and secured for snobs like me the right to live. God be with them . . . those in the Alamo. . . .

Shelby heard the faint slogging of hoofs. He looked up into a face as brown and weathered as old saddle leather; the face of a square-shouldered man whose squinted eyes watched him steadily.

Friend or foe? Shelby was trying to decide, when the leathery face broke into a smile.

" 'Pears like, son, you air headin' thet jackass in the wrong direction. Keep a-goin' west'erds, an' you'll be to San Antone. Which is apt to be about the most onhealthy place you'll find."

"Can I get through?" Shelby asked eagerly. "Can a man reach the Alamo?"

"Not onless ye can fly like a buzzard. An' the way it looks to this chile, the's goin' to be a heap of buzzard birds a-swoopin' around the Alamo. Some good men in thar, some mighty good men." He shook his head sadly. "M'name's Smith, son. Gen'ly called Deef Smith. Who might you be?"

"Shelby Lee, from Kentucky. And you're the scout. Can you tell me anything about a girl—"

"Thought ye might be. Thought I seen ye around Gonzales settlement. Could thet gal, now, have hair yeller as a butter ball?"

"That's her! Sabina Collins. Have you seen—"

Another sad shake of his head. "She passed thoo the Mex'can lines with Martin's men several days ago. A cottontail rabbit couldn't git thoo now. Way them dragoons is bee-hivin' around, they're fixin' for a grand attack. Son, I aim to camp close around here till I know what's what. You better stick with me. You got no mo' chance—"

"Thanks, Deaf Smith," Shelby said. "But I'm going."

"Po', headstrong, moon-struck boy," Deaf Smith murmured. He turned his horse about so he could watch Shelby Lee ride into the gloom, and he called, "Any word I c'n send yo' folks, son?"

Shelby shook his head, lifted a hand, and heard: "Then, go with God, son."

That ominous thunder again was rumbling to westward.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Scarlet Flag: No Quarter

THE afternoon of March 5th, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna issued secret orders to his commanding officers. The time had come, Santa Anna said, to strike a decisive blow upon the enemy occupying the Fortress of the Alamo. The next morning —Sunday morning—would be the proper time to send his army of several thousand men against the hundred and eighty-odd foolish gringos who would not surrender.

His cavalry, the two dragoon regiments of Dolores and Tampico, would surround the fort and cut down all who tried to escape. The storming force would consist of six battalions of infantry—the battalions of Jimenes, Guerrero, Matamoras, Toluca, Tres Villas and Los Zapadores. Colonel Ampudia's two artillery batteries would support the infantry which, before dawn, would form in four columns. The foot soldiers would carry ladders, crowbars and axes. The grenadiers would be supplied with "six packages of cartridges to every man, and the centre companies with two packages and two spare flints." The men would "neither wear overcoats nor blankets, or anything that might impede the rapidity of their movements." The commanding officers would see that the men had their chin straps down, and that they wore either shoes or sandals. The arms, especially the bayonets, were to be in perfect order.

*"The honor of the nation . . . His Excellency expects every man to do his duty. . . ."*

Bugles blasting in the chill, gray dawn. Sullen rumble of cannon as the Alamo's south guns answered the batteries which faced them. The soldiers of Mexico moved forward with a rush, while over the old church waved a blood-red banner and Santa Anna's bands struck up the shrill notes of the *deguello*—no quarter.

Shelby Lee reached San Antonio at midnight, only to find that Deaf Smith had spoken truly. He could not get through the Mexican lines. Until near dawn he played a dangerous game of hide-and-seek with the Mexican sentries, who everywhere surrounded the Alamo. Once, on his belly in a ditch or *acequia*, wriggling like a snake, he got within a stone's throw of the fort. A sharp voice challenged. A Mexican sentry came forward. Shelby took to his heels, the lead slug that followed him nipping blood from the flesh below his shortribs. He was lying doggo in a copse of mesquite, near the river, when the bugles lifted brassy voices in the dawn.

Immediately the ground trembled to the rushing tramp of thousands of feet. The wild shrilling of the *deguello* curdled in Shelby's ears like the wailing of anguished women. Cannons began their sullen thundering, and above all these sounds men were yelling, making an insane, horrible racket in the Sabbath dawn.

Shelby, too, went a little crazy. Bowie, Crockett and Travis, Cass and Little Cow —a lot of good men were going to die in the Alamo. A hundred-and-eighty men could not withstand this onslaught; and Shelby pictured Sabina, pierced through by a bay-

onet, the wonder and the glory of her forever stilled.

He rose and started running toward that hell of sound. He ran headlong into a rank of Mexican infantrymen; but the Mexicans were excited. The man Shelby cannoned into grilled something that sounded like *"Ching-gow!"* He used his musket for a club. Shelby went down and lay still.

He never knew how long he lay there, with horror washing over him, wave after wave. He never remembered all the details. There were some flat-topped houses. A big-wheeled cart stood beside one. He had to know, had to see what was happening. By means of the cart he reached the house top.

The flat roof was rimmed by a parapet three feet high. Shelby put his folded arms on the parapet, rested his head against it, and was violently ill. When he lifted his head he saw . . . a lot of things.

He watched and cursed and cried. Mainly his thought was for Sabina, and he knew that no man with white skin could get through to the Alamo. A red sun was lifting, small guns popped spitefully, and men were screaming and yelling and dying, while cannons growled their sullen accompaniment to these higher sounds. Yonder, above the church, the red flag fluttered lazily in the breeze.

Directly in front of Shelby, a column stormed the chapel of the Alamo. The chapel faced eastward, toward Shelby, and he could see the flashes of cannon-fire. Mexican soldiers were like swarming ants, dropping, writhing, dying. Then the Mexicans were underneath the cannons. Texas men came popping up into plain sight. With rifles and muskets they beat back the assault on the chapel, firing coolly, methodically. Several Mexican infantrymen were setting a scaling ladder against the wall, when Shelby saw Irish O'Shane.

ONE moment Irish stood there, a pistol in his hand. Then, from out of the blue, a thing no larger than the end of a man's thumb, a miserable little hunk of lead came to snatch the joy and the glory from him.

An oath that was like a sob came from Shelby's throat as O'Shane pitched forward, turned over once, lazily, and struck the ground—a dead, unmoving bit of clay against the brown Texas soil.

Mexican soldiers were swarming over the walls of the large area behind the chapel. The popping of small arms rose.

From the large open area behind the chapel rose a high-pitched, insane hell of sound. The Texans, in small groups, took refuge in the various rooms and in the long barrack set against the east wall; but the stout adobe walls could no long protect them. For the Mexicans turned some of the Alamo's cannons and sent shot after shot crashing through against the Texas men.

It seemed to Shelby Lee that the thing lasted a lifetime. In reality, the thick of the fighting lasted only thirty minutes. He couldn't see all that went on; he didn't need to. He knew his own people were being butchered, wiped out by bayonet, gunbutt and sword.

There rose a final mad shriek of sound, then suddenly the fury subsided. Here and there, frantic running figures emerged, only to be ridden down by the Mexican cavalrymen. But the battle, really, was over. The Alamo had fallen. The red flag still fluttered above the church.

Shelby Lee, somehow, was down off the rooftop. He had lost considerable blood from the wound in his side. He staggered like a drunken man—straight toward the chapel of the Alamo.

He reached the irrigation ditch that ran past the Alamo, was stumbling along it when, from ahead of him, women began chattering in Spanish. Switch mesquite grew along the ditch, and Shelby crouched in the mesquite, peering ahead. A wooden bridge crossed the ditch; some Mexican women laundering clothes in the ditch had found a Texas man, sorely wounded, hiding under the bridge. While Shelby crouched, watching, four Mexican soldiers came to see what all the fuss was about. There was nothing Shelby could do. They propped the wounded man against the end of the bridge. He never whined or begged. He said, quite distinctly, "Goodby, Molly. . . ." There was a ragged volley. He crumpled slowly, lay still.

Some sound brought Shelby around. He saw a woman with a blanket over her head and shoulders. Another laundress, he guessed. He took a step toward her, reaching for her throat. He heard her make a queer, choked sound. Then he tripped. He fell heavily, his head banged the ground.

Blackness came down over him. . . .

* * *

When the blackness faded, there was a heavy, ugly odor in the air. The odor of scorched flesh, of burning hair or feathers. He knew he must be imagining things; for right there, so close he could see all the horror and the woe in her eyes, was Sabina.

He tried to speak, but his voice came in a croak. She bent closer. "Ah, Shelby, Shelby, I thought you were dead, too. My brothers—Irish O'Shane—they're all gone. You're all I've got left, Shelby. All I have to love. Without you—"

"But you won't be without me," he said. "We'll get out of here. We'll leave Texas. Sabina, I thought you were inside there. I thought . . ."

She helped him sit up. She said, "I would have been. Yesterday I went to the house of a woman I know. I wanted some rags for bandages. The Mexican sentries would not let me back through the lines. Shelby, you can't know! All night I've watched and waited and prayed. Then, this morning—all those fine boys—Shelby, will you take me away? I can't bear it here, any more. Hauling wood, burning them. Shelby, they stacked our boys like cordwood—and burned them. . . ."

NO USE recounting how Sabina and Shelby got away from there. They hid in the mesquites until nightfall. They made their way, on foot, to the outskirts of town. Next day, about noon, they stumbled onto a little clearing, and Deaf Smith was there. With him were Mrs. Dickson, her fifteen-months-old daughter, and an old Negro. Mrs. Dickson had been inside the Alamo when it fell. She had with her the diary of her brother, Irish O'Shane. The last entry said:

"They might whup us but will never beat us. If we die, folks will remember. . . . Think i will live long time but if not i want Sabina to be happie. Love her i always will. . . ."

The little party reached Gonzales the afternoon of March 13th. Sam Houston, Commander-in-Chief of the Texas Army, was there. Above the shrieking and wailing of the thirty-two women who had been made widows by the fall of the Alamo, old Sam's voice rose, stilling the panic.

"You people listen to old Sam! The Alamo has fallen. Bowie and Crockett and Travis, young Irish O'Shane and a lot of other brave men are dead. We are going to retreat now. We are going to blow up this town and fall back toward the Sabine. But somewhere in East Texas we are going to turn and fight. The watchword will be 'Remember the Alamo!' Those brave boys who died there have not died in vain. The memory of them will live forever in our hearts. Their brave blood stains the Texas soil, but from that blood will rise a new republic. Tom Farron, Yancey—set powder kegs in each house!"

Shelby Lee, standing beside Sabina, watched the folks load their few belongings into wagons and ox-carts. He thought of his uncle's plantation, of the beaten bread and the cool brandy juleps. He said huskily, "I'm sorry, Sabina. I told you I'd take you away from here. Maybe I will, but that will have to wait."

Houston stood beside his horse, near the blacksmith shop. The wagons and carts were loaded. The "army" was formed in a ragged column. All these folks waited for Houston to give the command, when the retreat eastward would start. The fate of all of them rested in Sam's big hands, and he stood there, perhaps in doubt.

Shelby Lee addressed him humbly. "General Houston, suh, if you'll have me. I want to join yo' army. I want to fight. I want to fight for Texas."

"He's my man, General Sam," Sabina put in quite fiercely. "He's a fighteh, sir. All my men were fightehs. And when we lick those Mex'cans, we are going to build us a home! Will you accept him, General Sam?"

Houston looked at them. He looked at both of them. When finally he spoke, his voice was choked, his eyes very bright.

"Gladly," he said. "And God bless both of you, and the cotton and the corn you will raise, and the strong Texas sons."

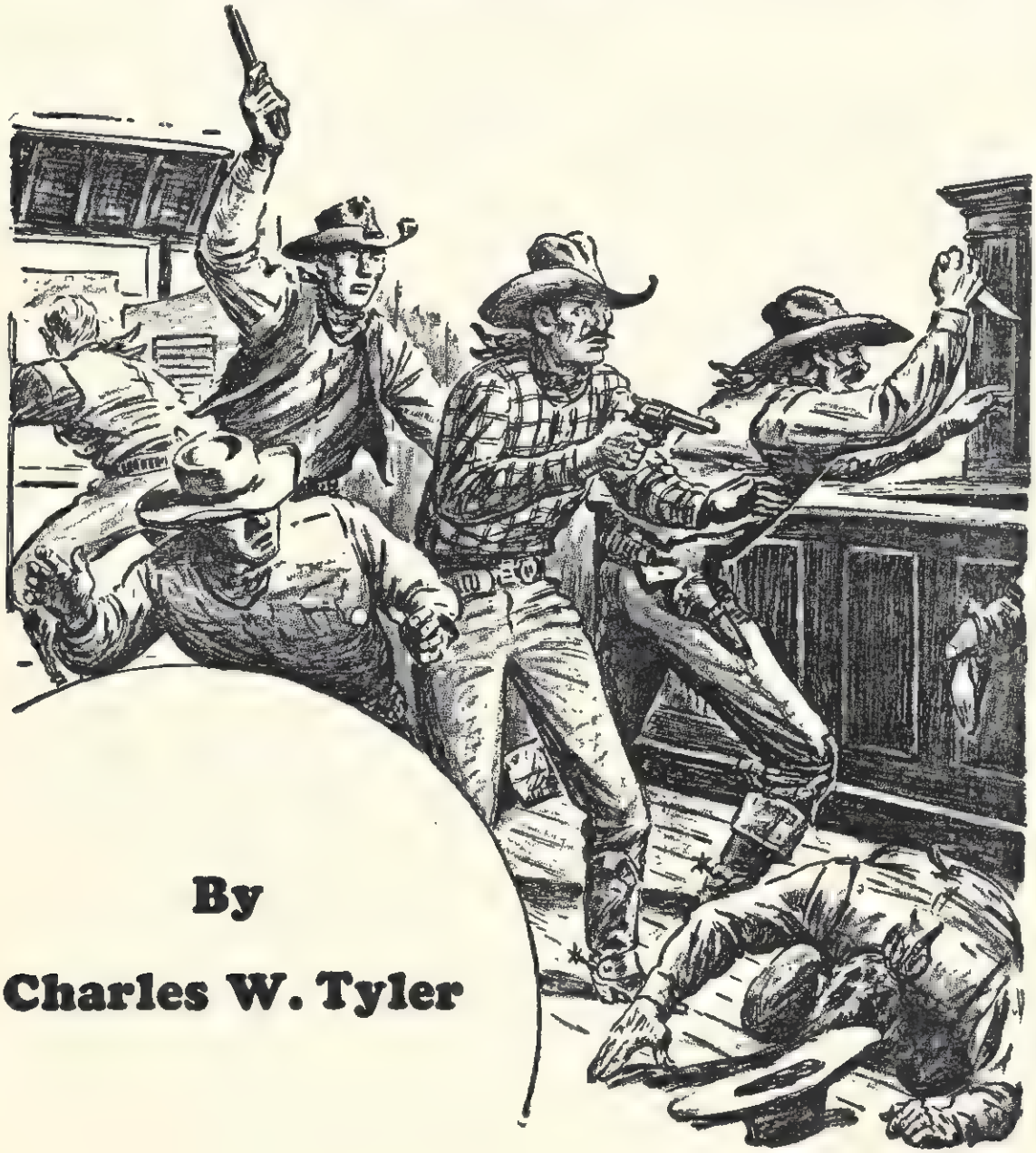
He stepped into saddle, pushed up in the stirrups and looked back down the ragged column. His voice seemed to have found a new strength, a new confidence.

"Move out, men! Move out! To the Sabine—and victory!"

THE END

# SHOOT 'EM QUICK

**Pilgrim, should you ride the Panhandle plains, keep an eye cocked for that ornery, whang-leather team, the Three Texas Hellions! For the Hairpin Kid shoots 'em quick and plants 'em fast, and old Wattles ain't been curried in seventy years. But the third jigger, Mossyhorn Dewlap, is the damndest of them all, for his high, wide lonesomes make sheriffs, killers—and undertakers—turn pale. . . .**



**By**

**Charles W. Tyler**

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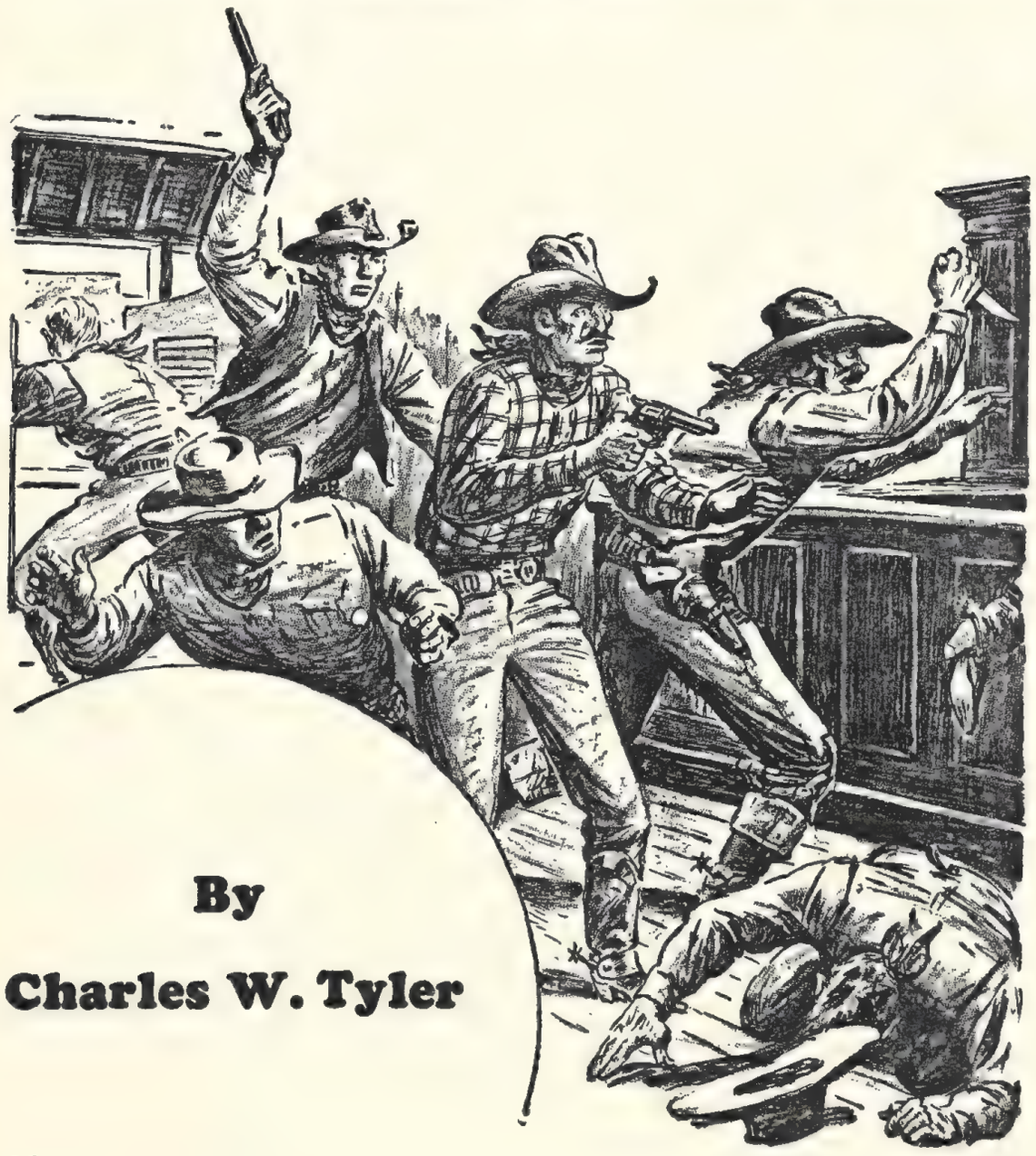

**By**

**Charles W. Tyler**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Hot Lead for Hellions

THE angry whine of a rifle bullet splitting the air over their heads was the first indication the three Texas hellions had that they were encroaching on peaceful pursuits. The Hairpin Kid's glance jerked toward the rimrock with sudden apprehension.

The distant *splat* of the rifle's first report had hardly reached the ears of the three riders before there was the sucking rush of a second bullet, uncomfortably close this time.

**Deal cleared the bar and landed amidst bottles and glassware**

hostile preserves. But they were, truly.

Old Dewlap reined up, batting his eyes owlishly. Wattles instinctively schrooched his head lower between his bony shoulders and swore, shocked that anyone should so unwarrantedly take liberties with their

Dewlap, with just enough Big Bender whiskey under his belt to make him feel practicably indestructable, faced the steadily deteriorating situation with unshaken dignity. Wattles, less concerned with decorum than with preserving his ancient hide from

# —PLANT 'EM FAST!

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needless wear and tear, flopped from the saddle and sought sanctuary behind a boulder, sputtering like grease in a hot skillet.

The Hairpin Kid, likewise, quit his bronc as a third missile slaped a rock beside the trail. He shouted at Dewlap. "Get down!"

Ignoring his pards and disdainful of the flying bullets, Dewlap remained in the saddle.

"To hell with 'im!" yowled Wattles disgustedly. "If the ole fool gits hits he'll jist leak whiskey."

Deliberately Dewlap removed his hat and waved it slowly back and forth with the calm assurance of a man whose prestige reaches to broad and mysterious horizons. A moment later a figure apeared on a distant rim and wig-wagged an answering signal.

"See?" Dewlap said, smirking tolerantly at his prostrate companions. "Friends, like I done figgered."

Wattles poked up his head experimentally; then, satisfied that the emergency was past, for the moment at least, crooked his leathery neck and regarded Dewlap with dark misgiving. "Ye mean ye make medicine with them thar bushwhackin' varmits, ye ole badger?"

"Yop," said Dewlap with an airy wave of a rope-scarred paw. "I make a dicker which complete surround us with a spell o' ease an' elegance leetle short o' sublime."

"Ye could say the same of a corpse," croaked Wattles.

Wattles and the Hairpin Kid had come to regard old Dewlap's friendships and his frequent schemes for attaining fame and fortune with dire misgivings, and at the moment they were far from being assured that the immediate future did not hold an outlook of a nature to make strong men shudder.

Old Wattles had a notion that the present situation stemmed from Dewlap's recent high lonesome in a cowtown called Esmeralda. A high lonesome was Texas talk for a big drunk, and the culmination of these sprees usually included the dismemberment of a saloon, the maiming of sundry inhabitants and a sojourn in the local calaboose. That or Dewlap became involved in dark intrigues with mysterious strangers that eventually ended in hair-raising encounters which threatened not only life and limb but the peace of Texas. Dewlap was some boy.

Back in Esmeralda Wattles and the Hairpin Kid had found Dewlap in a saloon in conclave with some hard-bitten individuals, deeply absorbed in his loudly proclaimed wickedness. With an eye to avoiding serious complications, they had hastened his departure, but it now seemed the damage had already been done.

"What the hell have ye been up to?" Wattles demanded.

"I don git us a job of ridin' with ole man Slaughter's Jingle-Bob outfit," Dewlap announced airily.

"Ye mean ye hire out to this Jesse Slaughter?" cried old Wattles, appalled.

"The same, no less," said Dewlap. "'Low them is some o' the Jingle-Bob boys now," flourishing a gnarled paw in the direction of the rimrock.

Wattles gaped at his pard, too stunned for words. The Horrell-Higgins and the Taylor-Sutton feuds, notorious for their killings, had been no less frightful in their day than the existing vendetta between the warring Thompson-Slaughter clans, another of a dozen or more family feuds that had resulted from disputes over cattle and range. To take sides with either faction was a sure invitation to bushwhack bullets, to violence and sudden death.

"Forty a month," announced Dewlap, smacking his chops, "an' free whiskey. Jist walk into a saloon an' tell 'em we're ridin' fer the Jingle-Bob."

"Shorely," croaked Wattles. "An' immejit some Thompson gents shoot ye out from under yore hat."

Several riders came down from the rims and approached at a gallop. A few minutes later they reined up, to view Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid with hard-eyed suspicion.

"Who are you hombres an' where do yuh come from?" demanded the spokesman, a long-bodied, hawk-beaked man.

"We done hire out to the Jingle-Bob," said Dewlap with a smug smirk "'Low ye're some o' Jesse Slaughter's boys."

"Jesse Slaughter?" hooted one of the horsemen. "That dirty, bushwhackin' cowthief!"

The hawk-beaked man uttered a savage oath and jerked out his six-shooter. "This is Pecos Thompson range," he said ominously, "an' you gents had better start sayin' yore prayers."

THE hoarfrost of age had silvered the hair and scraggy mustaches of Dewlap and Wattles, but their eyes were bright and there was a perpetual spark of youth in their souls that only six feet of earth would quench. The Hairpin Kid was twenty-odd, lean, brown and blue-eyed. His ability to fork horses in the rough string had earned him his name.

Off seasons, when not riding for Luther Tuttle, of the old Lazy Cross, the two oldsters and the kid sought high adventure up and down the land. The past few years they had come to be known as the three Texas hellions, being gifted, to quote a certain Sergeant Jim Tasker, of the Texas rangers, with the ability to raise up more general, unadulterated hell than a stampede of longhorn cattle.

Whatever family names Dewlap and Wattles had once possessed had been lost in the trail dust of long ago, and the pair of ringy old sin-twisters were content that their forbears remain decently buried in the yellowed pages of the past. The Hairpin Kid had come to the Lazy Cross, a range waif of twelve, as a tumbleweed drifts to a fence corner. Luther Tuttle and his wife had taken him in, and Dewlap and Wattles had become his self-appointed godfathers, teaching him rope and saddle lore and such other accomplishments as a son was like to need in brawling Texas.

Such profits as resulted from their adventuring afield, Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid invested in the Lazy Cross, a once-famous trail outfit that now was enduring lean years.

Coming down the trail to the town of Esmeralda, the trio of saddle-pards had heard whisperings of strife in the land—a shooting war between the Slaughters and the Thompsons—which had divided the county into two armed and warring camps. Neutrals and strangers were regarded with suspicion by both sides, and the only promise of eventual peace, it appeared, would come with the extermination of one faction or the other.

Of late, the fury of the feud had been growing, with many indictments for murder on the records. And the rumor was abroad that the governor was on the point of ordering the Texas rangers to take a hand.

Dewlap and Wattles cocked their hairy ears and sniffed the powder-perfumed air, having a zest for strife. However, they decided it was best to tread lightly until they were in a better position to estimate their chances of survival. This decision had been reached after observing a pair of ex-combatants hanging from the cross-arm of a telegraph pole on the outskirts of Esmeralda.

"Keep yore nose clean, ye ole catawampus," Wattles had warned Dewlap, as they turned into the feed yard of the livery barn, "or ole Gabe is liable to tootle his horn in yore year."

"I am a man of peaceful poresuits," Dewlay said solemnly, a far-away gleam in his washed-out blue eyes, "which I plumb abhor vi'lence."

Wattles and the Hairpin Kid had entered the Esmeralda general store to purchase the necessities of life, including a few extra boxes of ammunition, leaving Dewlap, temporarily, to his own devices.

It had been at this point that old Dewlap discovered that his bony shanks were wafting him in the direction of a convenient

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saloon. Having thus allowed himself to be placed in a position to slake his dryness, he let the tail go with the hide and was forthwith launched on a high lonesome.

Soon thereafter, his usual better judgment undermined by the snakes in the Big Bender whiskey, he fell in with certain gentry of the Slaughter clique, who, seeking to enlist hard-cases to fill henchmen's ranks repleted by rope and hot lead, had been duly impressed by the grizzled old sin-twister's boasting of gun-notches acquired back up the road.

A job, Dewlap had been assured, awaited himself and his companions at the Jingle-Bob, the permanency of which would depend largely on their durability and the number of Thompson scalps they accounted for.

The exchange of wig-wag signals which had brought about a halt to the rifle fire had, it now appeared, been the result of a misunderstanding, due to the conclusion reached by the Pecos Thompson riders that the hat-waver must be a fool or a friend to thus present himself as a target.

However, with the discovery that the three riders were admittedly headed to join the hated Jesse Slaughter outfit, the brief armistice was on the point of being dissolved. There were black scowls and oaths, as guns leaped from holsters and the strangers were ordered to "reach!"

The Pecos Thompson men were in disagreement as to whether their prisoners should be dispatched on the spot or taken to a place that offered facilities for hanging.

"Hold on, gents," said old Dewlap hastily; "mebee we kin make a dicker." He swallowed, blinked his faded eyes, his brain hitting a high lope in search of a way out of their predicament.

"Shorely," rumbled Wattles, aware that the situation called for speedy and adroit maneuvering if they were to avoid a violent and untimely end. "We kin explain everythin'."

The hawk-beaked man eyed Wattles, his lips pulling down in a contemptuous smirk. "Start talkin'," he said harshly, waggling his cocked six-shooter.

OLD WATTLES viewed Hawk-beak with mild disapproval. "Done figgered ye was badge-toters," he put forth cautiously, "an' 'lowed ye had us pegged."

"Whereat we deem it plomb discreet, no less," said Dewlap, "to make sign talk that we surrender peaceable."

Though they were often at odds, Dewlap and Wattles were forever quick to combine their wiles when on the horns of dilemma. The hawk-nosed man immediately showed awakening interest.

"Yuh mean that yuh hombres are on the dodge?"

"Reckon ye heerd tell o' that train robbery on th' 'Katy' up at Adair, Oklahomy," said Wattles. He waited, allowing the Pecos Thompson riders to drew their own conclusions.

The horsemen exchanged glances. Since the opening of the Thompson-Slaughter feud many men had drifted into the country who would not stand sunlight, and it seemed reasonable to believe that this trio might be outlaws.

"'Lowed to hole-up hereabouts," said Dewlap.

"Yuh must have got wind that Jesse Slaughter has been harborin' owlhooters," growled Hawk-beak.

"Mebbe so," said Wattles mysteriously. "A man would hear a heap o' things if he was ridin' with the Dalton boys, don't ye reckon?"

"The Daltons?" Hawk-beak squinted at old Wattles.

"Seem like I heard there was a sizeable reward offered for the capture of them train robbers," said one of the Thompson men.

"Here's where we collect," said another of the group. "Just like money in the bank."

The hawk-nosed man smiled thinly and nodded at two of his companions. "Get their guns, boys. We'll take them in."

A swarthy man and a snake-eyed cowboy stepped from their saddles and moved forward, having an apparent relish for the business at hand. The three remaining Pecos Thompson riders covered the victims with their six-shooters.

Wattles stood by the rock behind which he had recently taken cover, the picture of dejection. Dewlap, still in the saddle, peered from between his upraised arms, looking like a frayed-out old mossyhorn at a dry water hole.

The Hairpin Kid, standing a little apart from his venerable godfathers, shuttled his blue eyes quickly from one to the other, alert for weather signs.

"Never wuz so mortified in me life," mumbled Wattles, setting his head a-wag.

Dewlap cast a rheumy eye about cagily. "Life is a problem," he gloomed—and tilted a little forward, suddenly booting his spurs home.

The snake-eyed puncher was caught flat-footed. He managed a distressed howl before he was slammed to earth. The swarthy man had far underestimated the prowess of the ancient Wattles and realized his mistake too late. Almost in a twinkling he had been butted, kneed, bitten, bull-dogged and heaved a-sprawl into the cactus.

Dewlap, hunched over the saddlehorn and howling like a Comanche, headed for Hawk-beak. The latter's gun blasted but his horse was already veering before the furious charge and the bullet coursed away harmlessly. Before the Thompson segundo could loose a second shot his pony bogged its head, bowed its back and was in midair, its rider clawing leather. When the frantic animal swapped ends the hawk-nosed man was piled hard.

The Hairpin Kid's hand flashed to his holster and he dropped the second rider's pony from point-blank range. The third horseman, caught in a tangle of bawling, pitching broncos, was still attempting to rain clear when Dewlap's belting Colt sliced in under his hat brim.

With Dewlap's aid, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid quickly caught up their horses and piled abroad. They spooked the ponies of the Thompson men; then raced away down-canyon. Behind them a brief flurry of pistol fire voiced the futile Thompson wrath.

When finally the three hellions pulled up to let their horses blow, Wattles glowered at Dewlap and growled, "Let this be a lesson to ye, yuh whiskey-guzzlin' ole badger, an' don't go parleyin' none with strangers in these here parts."

"I am a reformed hombre," said Dewlap somberly, "a-yearnin' fer peace an' repose galore."

"Shorely," said old Wattles. "An' Boothill is where ye'll find it."

## CHAPTER TWO

### "Kill or be Killed"

SERGEANT James Tasker, of the Texas rangers, had learned his trade on Shooting Iron Road and he was a bad man to cross. Lean and weathered and wise, he labored to reform and Christianize those wayward sons who fomented trouble in the land.

Quick to interpret storm signals, his attention had been drawn to a fast-moving dust cloud on the trail ahead. Swinging his horse behind a thicket, he observed the pass-of three familiar figures, and his lids pinched down. Their mounts were a-lather and it was plain that there was urgency behind their going.

Sergeant Tasker promptly set spur to his horse and so, rounding a bend in the trail a mile or so farther on, came up with Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid as they were resting their broncs. Sad experience had taught the ranger that where a man found these three Texas hellions there was a lot of trouble.

As Texas fever was associated with ticks and screw-worms with blow flies, just so certainly pestiferous developments followed on the heels of the two old sin-twisters and the innocent-looking but equally resourceful button.

Neither Dewlap nor Wattles showed surprise when Sergeant Tasker put in an appearance. Rangers, like chiggers, were where you found them. A chigger was a kind of little red flea that surreptitiously got under your skin, causing a man on end of discomfort.

Sergeant Tasker eyed Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid with deep mistrust. "And where do you birds think you're going?"

"We was jist junin' 'round," said Wattles wearily, tugging at one horn of his dissolute mustache, "fer our health."

The ranger looked at the sweater horses. "Why all of the hurry?"

"Wall, I'll tell ye, neighbor," said Dewlap, pushing up his old wide-awake hat. "She's a fur poke between drinks an' time's a gittin' on."

Jim Tasker ignored the evasive reply. "I suppose you know there is a shooting war around here."

"Seems like we done hear of a leetle onpleasantness," said old Wattles, scrooching up his eyes reflectively.

Sergeant Tasker scowled. He had a hunch that the three saddle tramps had been up to something and was inclined to believe the worst. As though the Thompson-

Slaughter feud was not enough trouble, the country was overrun with renegades and gun-fighters, and late reports indicated a train-robber gang from Oklahoma headed this way. And now a trio of Boothill fugitives, in the form of Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid, had put in an appearance.

"I have a small request to make," said Jim Tasker, his tone disarmingly mild.

"We aim to obleege," said Dewlap, regarding the ranger with almost fatherly tolerance.

"In that case," said Jim Tasker, his jaw jutting slightly, "get out of my sight! Get out of the county! Get out of Texas!"

Heading for Esmeralda, Sergeant Jim Tasker came up with the Pecos Thompson riders across the low range that separated the two warring outfits. They were a sorry-looking group, with but four horses for the five men. One had a bloody scalp; another a broken nose and a swarthy rider carried the marks of a prickly-pear's wicked little needles.

The ranger recognized the hawk-beaked man as Waite Sitton, range boss for Pecos Thompson's Slash 7 and affiliate irons, a man with a reputation as a gun-fighter.

"You boys look a little hard-used," said Jim Tasker.

"We were jumped by some of the train robber gang that stood up that train on the Katy," Sitton said. "We were noonin' back in the rimrock. They worked us over, took one of our hosses and drug."

The ranger whistled softly.

"They mentioned they was headed for Jesse Slaughter's place," said the snake-eyed puncher.

"Always figgered the Jingle-Bob was a hole-up for outlaws," said Waite Sitton maliciously.

Coming from the Slash 7 foreman, Jim Tasker received the statement with a certain reserve. He had known craggy old Slaughter a long time, and considered him a square-shooter—a man ready to fight from the drop of the hat for his rights; not perhaps above slapping a Jingle-Bob brand on a stray maverick, but holding to certain tenets of decency and respectability of a level above association with men of wolf breed. His men were loyal and courageous and none, so far as he knew, had been recruited from the ranks of professional killers and badmen, as were many of those employed by Pecos Thompson.

The present feud had not been of Jesse Slaughter's making, according to all available evidence, but the cowman had picked up the gauntlet, even though he was threatened with bitter defeat in the face of superior numbers. Fear of the ruthlessness of the Pecos Thompson men had deterred many whose sympathies were secretly with old Jesse from taking sides in the range war.

The present situation was one that offered a new and alarming aspect, in that it seemed to indicate an influx of notorious outlaws from the Nations.

"These hombres claimed they had hired out to the Jingle-Bob," Sitton pointed out.

"How many of them were there?" asked Jim Tasker, his face showing puzzlement.

"Three," said Waite Sitton. "They mentioned ridin' with the Daltons."

"Three?" Sergeant Tasker raised an eyebrow. "What did they look like?"

"Two old ones and a young one," Sitton said.

"I'd know 'em if I met 'em in hell," put in the swarthy man savagely.

Jim Tasker opened his mouth, and closed it. There were occasions when no words could adequately express the things in a man's soul. He was beginning to see a glimmer of light—a glimmer that might have been likened to a small flame in the vicinity of a powder keg.

A small muscle was set to twitching along the ranger's lean jaw. "Two ole ones and a young one," he said, taking a mental glance over his shoulder at the three Texas hellions and those sweated horses, back there on the trail just north of Jesse Slaughter's home ranch.

IT WAS claimed that old Jesse Slaughter had "swum" more cattle into Kansas than any other drover. He had been one of the first trail drivers to take longhorns out of Texas, pushing a herd of beeves to New Orleans some eight years before "the Stars had fallen" at Fort Sumter.

It was young Jesse then, opening the Odyssey of the Texas steer, ramrodding those horn-clashing herds to Vicksburg to feed the men in Southern gray; shoving herds across the deserts and the mountains

to California to feed the gold-seekers. Jesse Slaughter steers had been among the first to hear the whistle of a locomotive on the Kansas Pacific at Abilene.

And then it was "old" Jesse, with almost half a century of trail driving behind him, settling down in Texas in the middle '80's to rest a while and dream of those fading campfires along that last northern trail to Miles City. With range and water and a comfortable home ranch, with his stalwart sons married off and grandchildren to think about, old Jesse Slaughter felt that he might now live out his span in peace and comfort.

Came a day when there was disquieting talk of a man come up from the Horsehead Crossing country to register the Slash 7 iron. Pecos Thompson, they said; a man with a reputation for unsavory affairs in the Staked Plains.

Under the escarpment of the high bench of White Man a sprawl of ranch buildings and corrals had sprung up beside the shallow stream-bed of Running Horse and Pecos Thompson's Slash 7 outfit was established. The Running Horse country had neither the grass nor the water to support a herd and the best range across the divide was taken to the uttermost limits, with every water hole and stream and tank appropriated.

Soon Pecos Thompson was thrusting an impudent foot into the door, as he began a slow encroachment on this greener range. Line riders began turning Slash 7 cattle back and there were clashes and a shooting or two, and men's tempers turned brittle.

Jesse Slaughter, respecting the rights of his neighbors and tolerant of those brands that mixed with his herds and fattened on his grass, had lived in peace and contentment on the range. And when trouble came out on the divide he had advocated tolerance and arbitration, looking toward a peaceful solution of the difficulties.

A drought year, however, brought trouble. Creeks and *tinajas,* or rock waterholes, became the graveyards of bawling, thirsty cattle. And then a small cattleman, defending his scant water supply against trespassing Slash 7 animals, had been shot down by Pecos Thompson cowboys.

Quick resentment had flamed and one of old Jesse Slaughter's sons had protested the outrage to Waite Sitton. The incident had passed with but an angry exchange of word. But that wasn't the end of the thing.

A week later, young Joe Slaughter, coming from a dance, had been bushwhacked, and another bloody Texas feud was launched. Grimly old Jesse took down his bone-handled six-shooter and his voice was raised in a cry that was a mixture of grief and fury.

"I'll kill any Slash 7 man who crosses my path!"

Joe had been the youngest, "the baby," and a favorite. With the death of the young cowboy, only Mark was left at home. Mark, the oldest, was slow-spoken, easy-going. Old Jesse had turned the affairs of the ranch over to him, content to step aside and take his ease in these sunset years.

And then, one day in Esmeralda, Mark had been caught in a cross-fire of half-drunken Slash 7 riders and gunned down. But before death had silenced his flaming six-shooter he had killed two of the Pecos Thompson men.

A cowman with the temerity to speak out in defence of the Slaughters had been called to the door one night and riddled by unseen horsemen—a lesson, members of the Thompson clan openly threatened, for those inclined to loose talk.

The ruthlessness of the Slash 7 men had its effect. Small ranch owners who had looked to Jesse Slaughter for aid in the lean years deserted him in his hour of trial, crying that they owed it to their families to remain aloof from the strife. A few even took to fawning before the snarling boss of Running Horse—to spying on their neighbors and betraying those secretly sympathetic to the cause of Jesse Slaughter.

The old man's four married sons, their outfits scattered across the range east of White Man Plateau, rallied to avenge the killing of Joe and Mark, and the feud swept on like a plague, leaving death and sacked ranchhouses in its path. Some took advantage of it to write off little personal hates and differences; others saw an opportunity to gain a few bloody dollars, a few cattle, a little more grass.

Pecos Thompson, his riders made up largely of professional killers, had been the first to voice the accusation that Jesse Slaughter was importing gun-fighters and that the Jingle-Bob had become a rendezvous of known outlaws. But it was not until a third son had been killed, and the old cow-

man saw the stark shadow of defeat and death stalking across the range, that the law of self-preservation forced the decision to fight fire with fire, with the result that he quietly set about the employment of men with notches on their guns—"men who didn't scare."

OLD Jesse Slaughter watched them turn in through the ranch gate—two craggy oldsters and a blue-eyed button—his beetling brows drawing down over eyes clouded with doubt, misgiving. These three didn't have the look of gun-toughs, but might have been grub-liners.

"Who are you and what do you want?" demanded the cowman, hoisting himself with some effort from the rawhide-bottomed chair on the gallery of the comfortable ranchhouse.

He looked like a hoary old warrior, the Hairpin Kid thought, who had survived droughts and blizzards to stand unconquered and defiant before a new foe. His hand hovered close to the bone-handled Colt, his eyes searching them with the fierce intensity of one who sees an enemy in every man.

"Reckon ye're Jesse Slaughter," said Wattles.

"I am."

There was something about Jesse Slaughter that reminded the Kid of a great oak being slowly strangled by Spanish moss. His was a weariness that reflected the ravages of time and the realization that insidious fingers were slowly ensnaring him, sapping his strength.

"Some gents in Esmeralda done sell this ole ranikaboo a bill of goods," Wattles was saying gloomily, pointing at Dewlap with his chin.

"I was what ye might term slightly indisposed," said Dewlap, "at the time, an' what-all onfold, ye'd be s'rounded, neighbor."

"Ye was drunk as a b'iled owl," snorted Wattles.

"Hum-the-so-ever," persisted old Dewlap, "I distinctly recall mention of a spread called the Jingle-Bob, which same lavish dinero on cowpokes, an' we jine up some for the emergency."

"An directly some *orejanas* sot out to abate us," said Wattles.

"My foreman, Mike Montoya," said Jesse Slaughter, "and Johnny Moses came back from town a couple hours ago and told me they had hired some hands. Gunfighters." He eyed the dusty saddle-tramps, his seamed features darkly skeptical. "Are you the men?"

"'Low we answer the prescription," Wattles said.

"We're hellers from away back," said Dewlap.

"Hump!" The cowman seemed not greatly impressed. "This is a finish fight," he said, grim-toned. "It's kill or be killed."

"She's a wicked world," intoned Wattles.

"Jist like back acrost the divide," sighed old Dewlap, "when we mingle with them Pecos Thompson jaspers."

"When you what?" cried Jesse Slaughter.

"Yop," affirmed Wattles, "us an' them wahoos go 'round an' 'round."

"She's nip an' tucker fer a-spell," said Dewlap, "but we final onravel 'em a few."

"You mean to tell me you've been in a fight with Slash *7* riders?" the cowman said incredulously.

"Didn't amount to much," said Wattles modestly, "but I hope it will be a lesson to 'em."

"Wa'n't nobody kilt," Dewlap said, "but they might as well been."

The Hairpin Kid told what had happened—about the attack, their claim to be owl-hooters, the attempt to take them prisoners and the fight. Slowly old Jesse Slaughter's stony countenance relaxed into a grin—the first time he had smiled since blood-spilling had started on the range.

"Beats my time," he chuckled, when the Kid had finished. He regarded the three buckaroos with growing respect. "And what did you say the names were?"

"Didn't say," rumbled Dewlap. "But up the trail we're knowed as Dewlap, Wattles an' th' Hairpin Kid."

"Jist a coupla ole mossyhorns, an' a button," said Wattles, his faded eyes peeping at the cattleman from under the wilted brim of his sombrero, "with sand in our craws an' powder to burn."

Jesse Slaughter nodded slowly. He knew the breed. Texas men—as legendary as the Alamo, as tough as whang-leather. His glance swung to the Hairpin Kid. "You remind me of my boy, Joe. The Thompsons

killed him." Slaughter stared at the Kid.

"Mebbe I could kinda take his place . . . pop," the Kid said softly.

The old cowman eased down off the gallery and to each gave a steel-trap handclasp. "You'll do," he said huskily. "You'll do."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Night Riders

PECOS THOMPSON was a man of violence. His warped reasoning allowed no room for fairness or justice, and his black moods incubated murder. A horse-thief and a cattle stealer in a day when these were capital offenses, his shrewdness and his ingenuity was worthy of a better cause.

Using legitimate enterprise as a mask for crookedness, stirring up hatreds and employing gun-fighters to smash those attempting to defend their range, Pecos Thompson stood on the threshold of victory. He had turned the once-peaceful range west of White Man into a battleground, and, like a carrion-hawk, was waxing fat on carcasses.

Divide and conquer was his maxim. Infiltrate. Sow seeds of jealousy and suspicion. Confuse and confound the law, bully and cajole its servants.

Once the seed was sown the tares sprang up with the wheat. The Thompson-Slaughter feud was nearing the harvest, a rich harvest for Pecos Thompson. All attempts by Sheriff Lucius Burge, at Esmeralda, to separate the weeds from the grain had only resulted in injury to the wheat—the established cattle outfits across the divide from Running Horse.

Sheriff Burge, long a friend of Jesse Slaughter's, found himself out on a limb. There was no evidence that Pecos Thompson himself was directly involved in the killings—that the shootings were planned. Indictments had named certain of his henchmen, but formal accusation and final trial, in this feud-torn land, was a difficult gulf to span.

The Texas rangers turned uneasy eyes toward the White Man country, but their forces were spread thin and it was only when known outlaws were reported moving in that Sergeant Jim Tasker was ordered to the scene. Like Sheriff Burge and Judge Lancey Frebold, he found the situation involved and dangerously explosive.

It was a pretty kettle of fish, and the only fact that a man could put his teeth in was the open declaration of old Jesse Slaughter that he would kill any Thompson man who crossed his path.

Jim Tasker's visit to the Jingle-Bob had only resulted in the cowman's unprintable confirmation of his earlier threat and the added and equally lurid statement that the surviving Slaughters would "kill their own snakes," and to hell with the rangers, the spineless judge and the belly-crawling sheriff.

Shortly thereafter the three Texas hellions had crossed the worrisome trail of Jim Tasker. The subsequent meeting with Waite Sitton and the Thompson riders had added nothing to his peace of mind. On the other hand, he had continued on to Esmeralda, sunk in the gloomy depths of a presentment that Texas was on the verge of an earth-jarring cataclysm that historians would record with a shudder. . . .

That Pecos Thompson would strike quickly there was little doubt, and that he would lash savagely at the Jesse Slaughter home ranch seemed equally certain. Motivated by the report that three supposed train robbers had taken refuge there, the Slash 7 was presented with the opportunity of not only striking a damaging blow at the Slaughter faction but of forcing old Lucius Burge, the sheriff, off the fence.

With the law aligned on his side, Pecos Thompson, plainly, was going to be in a position to continue the business of extermination under the assumption that the Slaughters and their friends were harboring outlaws.

In the early months of the feud a grand jury had been called and evidence presented that resulted in a number of indictments. However, when it came to making arrests there had been a pronounced reluctance on the part of the gentlemen named to accept the findings and several subsequent battles had discouraged further attempts to park the offenders and their friends in the pokey.

While the indictments had not included Pecos Thompson the accused were known to have been sufficiently friendly to the Slash 7 to leave little room for other than the conviction that they had been drinking out of the same cow-tracks.

As a somewhat belated champion of law and order, Pecos Thompson stood to considerably enhance his standing in the county and so eventually be in a position to show a more or less clean bill.

These and other bothersome thoughts coursed through the mind of Jim Tasker as, following the meeting with Waite Sitton and the others, he rode toward Esmeralda. After the affair in Wheel Track Canyon a man didn't have to be very smart to figure that this bunch would lose no time in taking their aches and their woes to the Slash 7.

The wrath of God, the ranger reflected grimly, would be no less terrible than that of Pecos Thompson when he learned that the Slaughter camp was on the point of being augmented by three hellions, socially on the level with the Daltons.

There were bound to be swift repercussions. Aware of the temper of the feuding factions, Sergeant Tasker felt that any contemplated counter-measures must be set up quickly if they were to be effective and open warfare averted.

DARKNESS had fallen when Jim Tasker reached Esmeralda. He stabled up at the Crockett Hotel livery barn and sent word to Sheriff Burge and Judge Frebold that he was eating supper and wanted to see them at once. They arrived before he had finished his belated meal, there in the hotel dining room.

Judge Lancey Frebold was chunky, pink-complexioned, soft-spoken. He might have been fifty-odd. He was fearless and with a reputation for fairness that had earned him respect. He had denounced members of both hostile clans, as he sought a common ground for settling the dread affair.

Lucius Burge, like Jesse Slaughter, had grown old in service to this new world that was building on the frontier. Tall, slow of speech, gray, gaunt, he was a man of character and courage. From the first he had had no liking for the man who came from the Pecos to usurp established grass and water, but he was bound not only by statutes but by a reluctance to spill needless blood. There were too many hot-heads, too many firebrands, ready to plunge blindly into battle, as had been the case when he had attempted to process those indictments.

Jim Tasker eyed the sheriff and the judge morosely. "You eat regularly," he said, when they were seated; "you sleep in a bed every night. When it's hot you can sit in the shade; when it's cold you can sit by the stove. You're the law in this god-awful country, but when hell begins to pop you rear on your hind legs and scream for the rangers."

"Why, Jim!" said Judge Frebold.

"Ain't yuh feelin' well?" the sheriff asked anxiously.

"I get fifty simoleons a month," Sergeant Tasker went on bitterly. "I'm half a man an' half a hoss. I sleep on the ground an' eat out of a greasy sack."

"What's got into you?" the judge said. "Is something wrong?"

Jim Tasker looked at him pityingly. "Is something wrong?" He bared his teeth in a set smile. "Did either of you hear of three birds called the Texas hellions?"

Judge Frebold pursed his lips. "The name stirs vague recollections. Something I read, perhaps."

Old Lucius Burge suddenly found hot feet, like a scorpion's, ascending his spine. That trio he had noticed in Esmeralda earlier today—two old ones and a kid. They had looked familiar but he hadn't been able to place them.

"Now that you mention them, yes," said the sheriff.

He had been in a cowtown up in the Panhandle on official business a year or so before. A fight had started in a saloon and when the smoke of battle had cleared the havoc that lay in its wake was something he was not going to forget. A pair of old hell-dodgers and a young cowboy, practically the only survivors, it had seemed, had ridden off, whooping and shooting. Onlookers had emerged from places of safety, following the carnage, and some had mentioned a name, almost reverently: the Texas hellions.

"I met them on the road to the Jingle-Bob," said Jim Tasker laconically.

Normally, a range feud was like a dread lingering sickness. A rider was bushwhacked on the trail. A son was set upon in town and shot down. A father was dragged from his bed and hung. A ranch-house was fired. It went on and on, eating its cancerous way into the life of a community, a fearful running sore for which there was no cure.

"And what does it add up to?" said the judge. "The presence of these outlanders."

"Trouble!" snapped Tasker.

"We must move deliberately and with caution," advised His Honor with judicial calm. "I would suggest that these-er-hellions be quietly but firmly advised to pull their freight."

"I'll ride out there in a day or so," said the sheriff a bit dubiously.

"Look," Jim Tasker said wearily, "as a servant of the people, sworn to keep the peace, unless you get some law-riders out to Slaughter's place within a matter of hours, there's going to be a fight that will make Adobe Walls seem like a Sunday school picnic."

"But Pecos Thompson don't even know that these men have moved in," protested Sheriff Burge.

"The hell he don't!" snarled the ranger.

"They are strangers," said the judge. "How can the Slash 7 be sure they are going to align themselves on the other side?"

"Because," Jim Tasker said slowly, "at approximately high noon, of this date, these three hell-bent ranahans met Waite Sitton and four of his men out in Wagon Track Canyon. And I mean they took 'em apart."

"There was a fight?" said the judge.

"Blood, hair and eyeballs."

Old Lucius Burge let his breath out slowly. "Oh, me! Oh, my!"

"God give us strength," murmured Judge Lancey Frebold, "in this our hour of tribulation."

THEY came up the trail from Running Horse, along the broken slope of the escarpment and on across White Man Plateau like scurrying black beetles. A dozen Slash 7 riders, headed by Pecos Thompson.

They drew rein before a patch of yellow light in Turnback Canyon and picked up a rider or two at the ranchhouse. They stopped at the Eleven Half Circle and were joined by Alex Colby and four punchers.

The fast beat of hoofs ran on then past the mouth of Wagon Track Canyon toward the Jesse Slaughter ranch. Pecos Thompson pulled down his mount finally a few miles west of the Jingle-Bob and a little clot of horsemen formed around him, listening closely to the sharp-edged voice of the satrap of Running Horse.

He was a blocky man, this Pecos Thompson, with a mane of unkempt hair and a black hedge of whiskers framing his red-veined face. He sat his horse like a rampant devil on a saddle-leather throne, his little eyes ashine with wickedness.

"We'll break old Slaughter's back tonight," said Pecos Thompson savagely. "The thing was made for us. Those train robbers will put us in the clear with the law; the rest is goin' to be easy."

There were nods, a murmur of assent. The Slash 7 ramrod let his eye sweep the pale faces, there in the blue night. Nick Abo, Clancey Deal, Porfio Varelo, Red River Regan, the snake-eyed puncher, and Waite Sitton—Pecos Thompson's congress of rimrock renegades.

"We'll move in as soon as the moon is down," Pecos Thompson said slowly, "an' smoke 'em out. You, Nick, will crawl up behind the ranchhouse on foot an' scout for a lookout. It it's all clear you strike a match, but shield it with yore hat on the house side. When we get the signal Clancey and Porfio are goin' to come in with the coal oil. Heave it over the edge of the roof and touch it off, you two; then pick up Nick and get to hell out of there."

"These hombres won't expect us to hit so quick," said Waite Sitton confidently. "Don't figger 'em to post a lookout."

"We're throwin' a circle around the ranchhouse," Pecos Thompson went on, "in easy rifle range. We can pick 'em off when the fire drives 'em out. The bunk house will go quick, once the main ranch is burnin', the way the wind is."

They rode on, stringing out single file, with Pecos Thompson setting a leisurely pace. They waited under a hill two miles away until the moon had dropped below the prairie rim; then went forward again, keeping to low ground to avoid being sky-lined.

Approaching the Slaughter ranch from southwest, the horsemen moved up a barranca. The sandy bottom of the ravine muffled the sound of slow-moving hoofs and deep shadows cloaked the file of riders. Somewhere along the barranca rim, the vast silence was broken at last by the plaintive cry of a killdeer. In the distance an owl hooted and far off on the flats there was the bark of a coyote.

Pecos Thompson and his men came finally from the flaring mouth of the barranca at

a snake-crawl, to coil around their leader for a last word before the jaws of the iron trap were set in a final ring of death about the home ranch of old Jesse Slaughter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hellions on Horseback

THEY ringed the table in the great living room, the three Texas hellions and Jesse Slaughter, a jug of whiskey within easy reach. Old Dewlap, mellow as an overripe mellon, possessed a radiant glow that brought youth to his ancient bones. Wattles, bloated with grub and pleasantly drowsy, sucked at a wilted cigarette and viewed the future with a preoccupation that was punctuated by an occasional healthy belch.

The Hairpin Kid listened to the talk, having no part in it. His two godfathers had raised him up to be respectful to his betters and to speak only when he was spoken to, as they had also taught him to avoid strong drink, to beware of the blandishments of accommodating ladies in town and to conduct himself generally with proper decorum.

The Kid examined the guns, knives and tomahawks above the fireplace—relics of Indian battles—with interest; then eyed the appointments of the room with wonderment and awe. They reflected something of the wealth and power that had come to the Jingle-Bob. It was the nearest to real luxury that he had ever been and he absorbed it all, thinking of the things he was going to have to tell Ma Tuttle when he got back to the Lazy Cross.

Ma, it seemed like, had never known the time, even when things had been the rosiest, that she felt she could afford to send to Kansas City for real nice things for the house. It had always been mortages or rustlers or droughts, threatening to wipe them out. That year Luther Tuttle had made the big drive to Montana she had kinda planned, if things went all right, to send outside for a few things.

That had been in '86-'87—the year of the big freeze-up that broke the back of the cattle business. But Ma didn't seem to mind—just so long as Luther and the boys came home to her.

"Better a crust of bread," Ma would say, "and happiness than all of the money and cattle in the world."

Old Jesse Slaughter had lots of money, the Kid reckoned, but money wouldn't buy back his boy, Joe, or Mark, killed in this range feud. Money couldn't stem the threat to those married sons or stop the rush of a bushwhacker bullet. Money and elegance couldn't erase those deep lines of worry that kindly Mrs. Slaughter carried. No moment of the day or night when the threat of Pecos Thompson and his gun-toughs was not hovering over the ranch.

"Kill or be killed." The words of old Jesse. They had not been spoken in threat or bravado but in weariness and dejection. A feud was never won. The survivors carried the scars of it to their graves, their victory a hollow thing that mocked them forever.

"How fur is it to this Slash 7 layout?" old Wattles was saying.

"Not far enough," said Jesse Slaughter wearily. "If it was ten miles the other side of hell it still wouldn't be far enough." He went on then to say that the distance was forty miles by wagon road, but less than half that by the trail down the escarpment under White Man.

Old Dewlap poured a tumblerful of whiskey. "Wood for my campfire," he said, and gulped it down.

"His brain don't ignite," Wattles told the cowman, "ontil his wick is wet."

Dewlap smacked his lips. "The trouble with whiskey," he said, "it evaporates too quick. An ijee don't scurcely have time t' ferment before the magazine is empty."

"Ye figger them varmints might hit t'night?" Wattles asked Jesse Slaughter.

"Pecos Thompson usually doesn't make any quick moves," the old cowman said; "he works more like a painter when it's stalkin' the kill. He'll be more dangerous a week from now."

Dewlap grunted. "When ye leave yore slicker in the wagin it rains."

WATTLES and the Hairpin Kid went out to the gallery and stood listening to the night sounds, as they had so many times when the herd was bedded and the guard was in the saddle—the small feet in the thickets, the call of the hoot owl, the cry of the killdeer, the whispering wind.

"Seems mighty peaceful," said the Kid.

"Jist like before a blue norther," grumbled Wattles.

A cigarette glowed down by the bunkhouse and after a little Mike Montoya came to the gallery. The foreman had sized them up while Johnny Moses was off-saddling earlier, doubtful that the strangers were as tough as the oldster called Dewlap had advertised, back there in Esmeralda.

"So you hombres come lookin' for trouble," said Montoya, his tone thinly derisive.

Wattles eyed the dark shape morosely. "We never look for trouble, amigo. We don't have to."

Dewlap and Jesse Slaughter came from the house. "Sergeant Jim Tasker, of the rangers, was here today," the cowman was saying.

"He'll be a big help," grumped Wattles.

"We meet 'im over the hill," said Dewlap dispassionately, "a-projectin' along with his tail over his back."

"Rangers is too damn nosey t' suit my appetite," Wattles said sourly. "Allus got their snoots in somebody's tracks."

"You birds on the dodge?" said Mike Montoya.

"Some says so," Dewlap said vaguely.

On a range torn by strife and overrun with hard-cases it was hard to know who to trust and loyal Mike Montoya found himself beset with doubts. Perhaps these three were spies. He fell dourly silent, listening to the run of talk.

The moon slipped out of sight and the shade was drawn on the silvered White Man rims.

Old Wattles raised off his heels, lifting his nose against the wind like a hunt-scarred hound. "Think I'll gear a hoss an' Injun around a mite," he said.

Mike Montoya eyed the grizzled oldster with deepening mistrust. "Yuh ain't got any funny notions?" in an edged tone.

"I'm crawlin' with notions," croaked Wattles, "an' one of 'em is to slap ye endwise, Johnny." He heeled around contemptuously and headed for the saddling corral, walking stiff-legged. . . .

It was midnight and Esmeralda was miles behind Ranger Jim Tasker and Sheriff Lucius Burge. A half dozen heavily-armed possemen trailed them through Wagon Track's silent river of blackness and on over the divide. An hour later they pulled up on the high-rounded breast of a bench to rest their spent horses.

The sheriff set his weight hard in the stirrups and slid his bony rump gently up the slope of the saddle. "I can't take it like I used to," he grumbled. After a little he added, "If this turns out to be a wild goose chase, Jim, I'll have some harsh things to say to you."

"A man can always be wrong," said Jim Tasker, "but in this case I come pretty near knowing what I'm talking about. Those old sin-twisters have lit the fuse and if there ain't one hell of a fight brewing I miss my guess."

A sound came down-wind, faint and far off, but there was no mistaking it. It was a rifle shot.

OLD Wattles often relied more on his nose than on his ears, claiming that a man could smell snakes before he saw or heard them.

It was dust smell that told Wattles that riders were moving in through the barranca. Powder-fine alkali dust, stirred up by hoofs, coming down-wind.

The gusty wind that soughed over the barranca rim rustled the black chaparral, swished through the sage, never strong, never entirely lulling. Thus sounds—hoofs, the creak of saddle-leather—in the black gutter below were lost to his hairy ears. But the smell of dust told the story. Riders in number were moving in on the Slaughter ranch.

The thickets along the high rim made it impossible to pick up the dark shapes at the foot of the slope and so estimate the strength of the invaders, but that was something they would discover soon enough. The immediate need was to send out a warning—a signal that would not give alarm to the night riders and yet would allow those at the ranch time to brace themselves for the attack.

Hunkered on his heels, old Wattles cupped his gnarled hands about his mouth, moistened his lips and experimented with a low note or two before emitting the plaintive, penetrating night cry of the killdeer. Aften an interval the deep voice of a hoot owl rode on down the wind, and finally the slow bark of a coyote, asking the attention of his lady-love, came from the horse pasture gate of the Jingle-Bob.

Long nights in the open, birds and animals their only neighbors, Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid had learned to imitate their calls with astonishing perfection. And now, with Old Man Death whetting his scythe for the harvest, the need was for quick communication and equally swift counter measures.

Jesse Slaughter and Mike Montoya had been a little amused and entirely skeptical of both the apprehension and the methods employed by these three drifters. It all appeared uncalled for and unseemly, but Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid had continued their preparations with methodical steadfastness of purpose, undisturbed by the carping foreman and the cowman's reiteration that the Slash 7 would not strike quickly or in force.

"Mebbe so," said old Dewlap. "Mebbe so, but ye kain't never figger varmints or weather."

"They'll come in through that there barranca," Wattles had opined. "I mind one time in the Nations . . ." his voice trailed off. A short time later he had ridden away to take his station on the wide gully rim. . . .

Where the barranca throat flared out a half mile west of the Jesse Slaughter ranch Pecos Thompson drew rein and the straggling file of riders lumped around him.

"Mind what I told you now," said the Slash 7 ramrod, low-toned. "When Nick strikes a match Clancey and Porfio ride in easy an' fire the house. Take lots of time. As soon as the flames start to make headway we'll close in, keeping bunched until I give the word; then ring the ranch. Shoot anything that moves."

Nick Abo swung out of the saddle and moved away. After a little Clancey Deal and Porfio Varelo set their mounts forward at a walk, to rein up half the distance to the black shadow of the ranch buildings.

Nick Abo covered the last one hundred yards in a crouch, stopping every few feet to listen, to search the deeper pools of blackness in the nooks of the ranchhouse and adjoining structures. There was only the wind gusts, ruffling the silence. The cottonwoods rustled their skirts like stately dames; a nighthawk whirled and dived. Time stood still.

Once Nick Abo caught a movement in the direction of the horse pasture, but he shrugged it off as the restless drift of the saddle stock. Confident that old Jesse Slaughter had left himself wide open, the stalker searched forth a match and struck it on his boot sole. The flame made a brief halo in the blackness and died.

Deal and Varelo moved up.

Came a sudden high-pitched howl—a mixture of a Confederate yell and a Comanche war whoop—and the thunder of pounding hoofs. A close-bunched band of horses—fifty or more—urged on by screeching riders, broke from the pasture gate and swept on past the ranchhouse like a cavalry charge.

NICK ABO started to run, a cry of terror choked off in his throat as he was knocked over and trampled. Clancey Deal let loose of his coal oil can and grabbed for his saddle-gun, certain of nothing except that hell was over its banks. He managed one shot; then wheeled his cayuse and attempted to spur out of the path of the horsehide avalanche.

Off on the flats, Pecos Thompson screamed a curse. "'Its a trap!" He leaned forward, roweling his horse. "Let's get in there; it's goin' to be a shoot-out."

Confident that theirs was a superiority in numbers, the Slash 7 men raced toward the ranch, clearing their guns. Waite Sitton pulled up beside Pecos Thompson. "This is the chance I've been looking for." He lifted his Winchester from its boot. "Here's where I settle with them cursed owlhooters."

The cowboy called Varelo came to meet them, his horse at a dead run. *"Por Dios!"* he cried. "There is many of them."

"A dozen, at the most," snarled Pecos Thompson.

The Slash 7 riders fanned out and a horse, riderless and saddleless, drove in among them to collide violently with a cursing puncher. Came another. And another. Terror-crazed horses swerved, bawled, bucked. Riders fought their mounts, searched the gloom for human targets for their guns; blasting wildly.

It was Waite Sitton who saw what was happening and his voice lifted furiously above the tempest. "They're throwin' the remuda at us, you fools! Look for riders an' don't be shootin' crazy at every damn hoss in sight."

Suddenly a naked torso, scrawny as a

fencepost and black as midnight, lifted from a hard-running bronco's bare back and a cracked voice squalled, "Git skelps!" A moment later there was the dull glint of a knife, arcing wickedly at a startled Slash 7 man.

Waite Sitton seached the gloom for other riders flattened on the backs of darting cayuses, and made out a second of these frightening and elusive riders. The next moment he uttered a startled curse as the first black torso wheeled its mount and came at him.

The thing could have been a redskin, except for its rampant mustache and bald dome. Sitton thought he recognized the craggy outline of one of the old hellions that had given the Slash 7 riders trouble in Wagon Track Canyon.

The segundo batted at his assailant wildly with the barrel of his carbine, but the other ducked under it and a long arm swung a knife in a wicked sweep that threatened disembowelment. He lurched away in the nick of time, escaping with a surface gash along his ribs. The next instant the yowling rider was lost in the boil of dust and riders.

A blood-curdling yell turned a second Slash 7 rider in the saddle and he found a strange figure, naked to the waist, pacing up beside him, a tomahawk waving. It didn't matter that the tomahawk was one of Jesse Slaughter's relics of the Indian wars, which, of course, the Thompson men couldn't know, or that the apparition was evidently a white man—the thing was none-the-less hair-raising.

The tomahawk whacked at his skull and the rider, bleating in sudden terror, reined his horse away, which brought it in violent collision with a lathered horse carrying a lean, weathered figure from which torment was welling in desperation-born cuss-words.

It was Sergeant Jim Tasker.

THE battle ebbed and flowed with the violence of a gully-washer ripping through a storm-torn valley. The Slash 7 riders found themselves fighting a foe as elusive as brush steers. In the blackness it was impossible to determine which bronc carried a hellion, flattened to its back, and which was riderless.

Some of the foremost horses had been turned back before the fast run of other horsemen coming up along the wheel-ruts, winding in from Esmeralda, and milling beasts thus thrown again into the turbulence added to the confusion. Bright muzzle-flame, gun concussions, the bawl of maddened broncs, the hammer of hoofs and human howls presented such a night-shrouded scene as it had never before been the pleasure of old Lucius Burge to witness.

Riding beside him into the maelstrom was Jim Tasker, whose dark prediction back at Esmeralda seemed to have been a gross underestimate of hell at its worst.

"You see what I mean," said the ranger grimly.

"Holy miraculous!" gasped Sheriff Burge, jerking his horse from the path of a caterwauling shape lying over the neck of a madly galloping pony. A second horse slammed into the ranger.

Sergeant Tasker had partly jumped and partly been thrown clear of the tangle of horses and he staggered to his feet, his worst fears realized. The fight was on in all of its fury and there didn't seem much that he could do about it.

Pecos Thompson had reined up, baffled by the fury of the unexpected attack, oaths raging from him. His men were scattered; some were down. It was impossible to estimate the strength of the Jingle-Bob forces and too late to attempt to rally and reorganize the Slash 7 riders.

A rider coursed past and he had a brief glimpse of a dull-glinting lawman's badge. Recognizing the tall figure in the saddle as Sheriff Burge, Pecos Thompson knew that this night's page in the feud was written for the last time. Shaking his fist at the ranch on the flats, he turned his horse toward the dark mouth of the barranca.

Waite Sitton and others, pulling out of the fight, joined him. Some were nursing knife cuts, some bullet wounds. Alex Colby, who months before had cast his lot with the Thompson clan, had lost a cowboy. Nick Abo was missing, as was Clancey Deal.

At the ranchhouse lights came on and the yard filled with riders, their voices exultant. Mrs. Slaughter stood in the open kitchen door, yellow light flooding past her, anxiety in her eyes.

"Jesse!" she called. "Jesse!"

"Here, mother," answered the old cowman. "I'm all right."

"Thank God!"

Sheriff Lucius Burge rode up, looked around him, his face showing vast puzzlement, perplexity. He squinted hard at three of the strangest specimens a man would find in many a day—two mustached figures and a kid, stripped to the waist and their bodies smeared with soot and grease. Their faces were likewise daubed and streaked and frightful to behold.

It came to the sheriff that back at Esmeralda Ranger Jim Tasker had spoken of a pair of old hellions and a younger offshoot, warning that where they set foot flood, fire and pestilence were like to result. Too, Sheriff Burge remembered back to that day up in the Panhandle when the earth had trembled and the heavens had fallen, following a visitation by three hell-bent buckaroos.

Lucius Burge pushed back his hat. "Now," said he, "I have seen everything."

Jim Tasker came limping in on foot, dusty, grim and with fire in his eye. He looked at the half-naked figures, astraddle the bare backs of the Jingle-Bob cow ponies, and his lips compressed and he breathed through his nose.

"So you're at it again," said the ranger.

"Ugh!" said the scrawnier of the oldsters.

"Heap big chief," said his saddlemate.

"The plan worked," Jesse Slaughter said, smiling a little.

"I had yuh figgered wrong," Mike Montoya told Wattles apologetically. He turned to the sheriff. "These hombres smelled out the attack in time for us to ready for it."

"They blacked up," the old cowman continued, "and went out with the remuda to break their charge and throw the fear of God into 'em. Mike, Johnny Moses and the rest of us trailed along and mopped up with six-shooters." He looked at the sheriff defiantly. "There's two out there to feed the buzzards. Two for sure; might be more."

Old Dewlap pulled a bloodied Bowie knife from his boot, testing its sharpness with his thumb. "More skelps fer my wigwam."

Lucius Burge stared. "You're joking."

"The hell we are," growled Wattles.

"White men an' redskins," said Dewlap. "I loose track y'ars ago."

"Are you heathen?" cried the sheriff.

"Bald haids," said Wattles, "we jist lop off the ears." He suddenly began to laugh.

"I wouldn't put it past the blood-thristy old buzzards," said Jim Tasker.

"You, a ranger, knowing the story of this fight, talk about blood lust," said Jesse Slaughter furiously. "What could be more hellish than Pecos Thompson's attack?"

"Don't forget that you're playing the same game," said the sheriff.

"You call defending my home playing a killer game?" roared the old cowman. "The law can't—or won't—defend me and mine." He struck his holster with the flat of his hand. "I'll fight to the last cartridge—to the last man. This feud was forced on me. My sons were shot in cold blood and nothing was ever done about it. What happened to those murder indictments? What happened to all the talk of law and order? I'll tell you what the trouble is, Lucius. Pecos Thompson and his gun-riders stand to control the range, with their terror tactics. You and Lancey Frebold saw the writing on the wall and you climbed on the fence."

"You're bitter, Jesse," the sheriff said. "Can't say I blame ye much," wearily.

"I'm bitter and I'm hard," said the old cowman. "And from tonight hell is going to pop. I've got men with guts and scalping knives, and Pecos Thompson wants to look out."

Old Dewlap, hardly recognizable behind his warpaint, bobbed his head somberly. "We make potent medicine."

"We'll Injun them ohmbrays t' death," said Wattles with a smooched smirk.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Knife Brand

THE seed had been planted. The story spread like wildfire. It traveled back to Esmeralda with the sheriff's riders and was borne thence on the four winds. And as it traveled it grew with each telling.

Jesse Slaughter was adopting Indian tactics, taking a page from the book of the redman in this feud out beyond White Man. He had enlisted the services of hellions who stalked their prey with knives, who rode without saddles, who entered into battle with war whoops—and who took scalps.

Gallery and saloon groups in Esmeralda spoke in hushed tones of these hell-riders and their tomahawks. A few had the temer-

ity to suggest that Pecos Thompson's great mop of hair would make a fine trophy.

Guns, like smallpox and accidents incidental to cattle raising, were regarded in the light of normal afflictions in a land of violence. A knife, on the other hand, was something to make a man's flesh crawl. The very thought of eight inches of cold steel, probing at his vitals, could make a man turn green. Too, it worked silently.

And a knife was messy.

That night, there on the sage flats at Jesse Slaughter's place, a new sort of warfare had been introduced. It left its imprint not only on the bloodied pages of the Thompson-Slaughter feud but in the minds of men, as well.

Pecos Thompson built his defenses around the presumption that Jesse Slaughter would retaliate for that sneak raid in kind—and waited. But nothing happened.

The morning after the fight at the Jingle-Bob Jim Tasker and Sheriff Burge listened grimly to Nick Abo's story, the conviction growing that old Jesse was in the right. Abo, badly mauled, apparently felt that confession was not only good for the soul but might serve to temper possible punishment when eventually justice was meted out by a court of law instead of by Colt and Winchester.

"It was fixed to burn Jesse out," Nick Abo said, "an' start shootin' when the fire forced everybody into the open."

"Thompson knew there was a woman here," Jim Tasker said coldly. "What about her?"

"Pecos never said."

A second wounded rider, Ben Yaras, had been picked up on the flats, but he sullenly refused to talk. Both men had been loaded into a wagon, borrowed from Jesse Slaughter, and taken to Esmeralda for medical attention and to be held in jail as material witnesses.

The dead pair had also been taken along—just in case, Sheriff Burge said, the two old sin-twisters persisted in their notion to lift the scalps of their fallen foes.

"You can send in for your team later," the sheriff told Slaughter. "It will be at the livery barn."

"Some of the boys will come for it when I need supplies," the old cowman said.

Jim Tasker didn't blame the sheriff too much for his failure to act on the indictments. In the early days of the feud there had been a tendency to regard Pecos Thompson in the light of a crusader, a little cowman fighting for range and water against a big outfit. The Slash 7 had had many sympathizers, but most folks were fair, Tasker reasoned, and now there was bound to be a shift of public sentiment, a thing that every public official was forced to take into considerattion if he wanted to stay in office. After the savage night attack, the hot heads would be less inclined to forcibly oppose the processes of the law, the ranger thought.

Out on Running Horse the Slash 7 men had turned jumpy, seeing imaginary skulkers behind every bush, lurking in the shadows. The possibility of a cowboy waking up with his throat cut made the line camps dread assignments. A constant thread of fear ran through the fabric of things, disrupting the routine of working cattle.

There was, too, something else, and that was that Nick Abo and Ben Yaras, being held in the Esmeralda jail, might stand in court as damning witnesses against the Slash 7 one day. They knew too much and Pecos Thompson, seeing the handwriting on the wall, was determined to either free them or kill them in their cells.

There was a story behind the bearded man with the long hair that harked back to his flight from the Horsehead Crossing country—the story of a "cropped" ear and a man of wolf breed that Ben Yaras knew.

Pecos Thompson thought a jail delivery shouldn't be hard, particularly on a Saturday night, when Esmeralda would be full of cowboys looking for fun, frolic and fights. With Waite Sitton, he worked out a plan. Old Sheriff Burge, they thought, could be handled, but Jim Tasker, if he was still in town, was going to be a little harder nut to crack.

A ranger was tough, but a bullet in the back had stopped better men than Tasker, Sitton pointed out.

"Then we can start nibbling away at Jesse Slaughter again," said Pecos Thompson.

OLD Dewlap had been going around with a dreamy look in his faded eyes for several days, and when he overheard Jesse Slaughter mention that they were running short of certain supplies he found an excuse

to avoid Mike Montoya's daily riding assignment. Then, with Wattles and the Hairpin Kid out of the way, the canny oldster worked up to suggesting that it might be a good idea if he went to Esmeralda for the mail and to return the team the sheriff had borrowed.

An accumulating thirst had been largely responsible for Dewlap's nimble brainwork, for the reason that whiskey had been one of the staples that the Jingle-Bob had run out of.

Provided with a list of necessities, including a couple of jugs of Big Bender whiskey, Dewlap blithely geared up his horse and set out for town.

"You be careful now," had been Jesse Slaughter's parting word, "though I don't think you'll have any trouble. They say the Slash 7 men have been staying out of Esmeralda since Jim Tasker moved in."

"Don't ye fret none," Old Dewlap had assured Jesse, with a flip of a bony paw. "If thar's trouble I'll be jist as scurce as a hoss-thief in Heaven."

Thus it was that along in the shank of Saturday afternoon Dewlap approached Esmeralda with a burning thirst and in anticipation of a high lonesome, far from his well-meaning but meddlesome pards, old Wattles and the Kid.

Esmeralda town lay a-drowse in the waning day, a few teams, a few slack-hipped ponies at the hitch-rails, the usual Saturday marketing in progress, the usual early-comers in the saloons wetting down the dust in their craws. Everything was peaceful and orderly, with not a cloud in the sky.

And then old Dewlap arrived and there was set to stirring a small freshening breeze from those nether regions where hellions abound.

Dewlap quaffed a slug or two of his favorite Big Bender whiskey; then stabled his pony and presented himself to Sheriff Burge, conveying his compliments, remarking on the weather and explaining that, as an emissary of Jesse Slaughter's, he would take his departure with the borrowed team directly.

"And the quicker the better," said the sheriff, "you damned old cannibal. Barring a few indiscreet individuals, at the moment incarcerated in the jail-house, this town is enjoying the fruits of a hard-earned rest from a-feudin' and' a-fightin' so-and-sos."

"I come as one bearin' a olive sprout," said old Dewlap, batting his eyes piously, "an' I hold my brothers in esteem, leetle short of remarkable."

"Just one yip," growled the sheriff mistrustfully, "and I'm going to throw your pants in the calaboose."

Dewlap took his leave of the sheriff, as one misjudged, and, selecting the most imposing saloon on Front Street, entered the Boot Hill Bar. His choice, as it developed, was a little unfortunate, in that it was the usual hangout of Pecos Thompson when he was in town.

THE Boot Hill Bar, so named for the reason that in an earlier day it had provided the first permanent residents for that piece of ground later set apart as a cemetery, was an establishment of considerable elegance and the pride of its owner, one Bigfoot Pike, who had dedicated his life to the procurement of a type of art and other expensive bric-a-brac best suited to the tastes of his customers.

Dewlap viewed the premises with a practiced and appreciative eye and embarked on the early phases of a blissful passage to that Texas realm known as a high lonesome.

Time passed pleasantly and with a growing influx of convivial souls to speed the evening, among them a glowering, bearded man, who found a place beside old Dewlap at the bar. Bigfoot Pike smirked at the newcomer and addressed him with familiarity.

"Evenin' to ye, Pecos. Quite a stranger."

Dewlap, a-brim with Big Bender whiskey, viewed the new face in the back-bar mirror with hazy interest. The name spoken by the proprietor was lost to him in the yammer of talk, and he had no recollection of ever having seen the gentleman. In fact, after a few drinks, old Dewlap had trouble recognizing his own countenance in the mirror.

"Howdy, Bigfoot," said the bearded man. "Yes, I guess I'm a mite strange, but I had a little business in town and when it's done old Burge and a few more will be a hell of a sight better acquainted with Pecos Thompson."

Something strained for recognition in the fog in the back of Dewlap's head but failed to penetrate the accumulated layers of hard liquor.

Meanwhile, the variously disposed forces of law and its opposed factions were moving toward an open breach at an accelerated pace. Waite Sitton had marshaled the Slash 7 forces in a saloon not far from the jail, awaiting a report from scouts dispatched to locate the whereabouts of Sheriff Burge and Jim Tasker.

The brazen appearance of Pecos Thompson and his men, arriving in Esmeralda in force and with friends and cohorts, was a disturbing factor that sent the sheriff into hurried conclave with Judge Lancey Frebold and Jim Tasker.

"They're after those prisoners," said the judge, "as sure as you're born. If there is a jail delivery we're sunk."

"They're not going to take them," said the ranger, tight-lipped.

Burdened with worry over the influx of heavily armed Slash 7 men, Sheriff Burge, until this moment, had forgotten old Dewlap, who when last seen had been entering the Boot Hill Bar.

"I just saw Thompson going into Bigfoot Pike's place," said Jim Tasker.

The sheriff's mouth fell open; then banged shut with a pained oath. "Hell's bells! One of them old apes from the Jingle-Bob went in there an hour ago."

They had been talking in a back room of the Crockett Hotel's bar. Jim Tasker jumped for the door. "Wait for me right here."

In a few minutes he was back. "As God is my judge," he exclaimed, mopping his forehead, "the one they call Dewlap and Pecos Thompson are drinking together in the Boot Hill!" He glared at the sheriff. "Why didn't you tell me that old badger was in town, Lucius?"

"Clean forgot."

"If one of those three hellions are here," said Jim Tasker, "the other two are not far off."

"It's all very confusing," said Judge Frebold nervously. "What can we do?"

"If you've got a Christian conscience and believe in the Lord," said Jim Tasker gloomily, "you'd better start praying, because murder, mayhem and hell are in the making."

WHEN old Wattles and the Hairpin Kid returned to the ranch and learned from Jesse Slaughter that Dewlap had gone to Esmeralda they quickly roped out a fresh pair of tough broncs and screwed their saddles down.

"Might 'a' knowed the loco ole ijit was fixin' t' git on a toot," rumbled Wattles.

"Dewlap always gets in a fight when he goes to town," the Kid told the cowman. "He's liable to need us."

And they were kiting away in a cloud of dust before old Jesse Slaughter could offer to join them. Wattles was full of lament, fearful that Dewlap might "bog hisself in the graveyard" before help arrived.

"It would be awful," Hairpin said, "goin' back to the Lazy Cross without Dewlap."

"I'll never cuss th' ole badger out ag'in," Wattles choked. . . .

In the Boot Hill Bar old Dewlap was beginning to cause Bigfoot-Pike some uneasiness. The oldster beside Pecos Thompson had pushed back his hat and was shading his eyes with his hand and peering foggily into the back-bar mirror.

"You lookin' for somebody, my friend?" said Bigfoot Pike. The formula was to humor a drunk until he started to get obstreperous; then signal the bouncers to "hoist him."

"I'm sartin I seen Pizen Pete," mumbled Dewlap, peering past Bigfoot.

Pizen Pete was Dewlap's arch enemy, a chimerical figure he at times confused with his own mirrored likeness. When he was "biled" Dewlap's brain performed strange gymnastics, and, on occasion, developed amazing sagacity. At the moment he found tardy recollections bubbling to the surface. He back-tracked mentally to a point that brought into blurred focus that group of hostile riders they had encountered in Wagon Track Canyon.

"This is Pecos Thompson range," the hawk-beaked man had said. He and his compadres had menaced Dewlap and his pards with six-shooters. Pecos Thompson was the snake-in-the-grass that had attacked that night at the Jingle-Bob.

Dewlap's watery eyes acquired a slow gleam, like sunlight filtering through clouds. This pork-bellied barkeep had addressed the bearded hombre as "Pecos," and Long-hair had bragged that he was Pecos Thompson, in town to transact a little business.

Old Dewlap assumed a half crouch, apparently desirous of concealing himself from enemies yonder in the mirror. "Damn

if it ain't Pizen Pete, thar in the bushes!" he hissed. He was looking straight at the reflection of the bearded Pecos Thompson.

"Ye're drunk, yuh damned old fool!" snarled Pecos.

"Drunk or sober," Dewlap said slowly, "I savvy hoss-thief sign."

Pecos Thompson's heavy features purpled. His big hands moved slowly away from the glass and whiskey bottle before him and lay flat and hard on the bar.

Branded a horse-thief and a no-good back in the Staked Plains, angry men had put a mark on him that his long hair covered.

"I mind the time," old Dewlap was saying, "when they crop a hoss-thief's ear an' turnt him loose, bein' they figger hangin' is too good fer the low-down cuss."

Old Wattles and the Hairpin Kid slowed their lathered horses to a walk as they came into Front Street, their eyes searching along sidewalk and gallery. Coming to the Crockett Hotel they saw the sheriff and turned in to the hitch-rail.

"Yuh see anythin' of our pardner?" said the Hairpin Kid.

"Likely is drunk as a fiddler's hootnanny," said Wattles.

"Must be drunk," said Sheriff Lucius Burge. "Drunk or crazy," with a snort. "Because the fool is in the Boot Hill Bar drinking with Pecos Thompson."

"Goddlemighty!" croaked old Wattles. "Don't tell me that."

"He never seen Pecos Thompson," the Kid said, "just like us."

"You'll all see plenty of him now," said the sheriff grimly. He explained that the town was full of Slash 7 men, primed for trouble. "Jim Tasker is around somewhere, sizing up the situation. I've got men guarding the jail, but right now I'm keeping my eye on the Boot Hill, across the street, for the signal, when the thing breaks, will come from Pecos."

"We've got to get Dewlap out of there," Hairpin said, "before they kill him."

"It would be a mercy," growled Wattles.

Wattles and the Kid swung from their horses, watching toward the Boot Hill saloon. They saw Waite Sitton and two punchers then, on the opposite sidewalk. A moment later the trio were pushing through the batwing doors into the Boot Hill saloon—and the hell the saloon was soon likely to become.

"Let's go," the Hairpin Kid said.

But already old Wattles was half way across the street.

Murder was in the making in the Boot Hill bar, and Bigfoot Pike was watching Pecos Thompson. A fast draw, a quarter turn and they were going to have a dead man to mop up after.

He was feeling a little sorry for the grizzled old cowpoke, Bigfoot told later, but not for long.

Old Dewlap's right hand, which had never been above the bar since he had started stalking Pizen Pete, whipped into view. There was the brief flash of a knife-blade—and Pecos Thompson's right hand was spiked to the mahogany with a Bowie knife.

The story of old Jesse Slaughter's scalp-hunters was still a vivid thing in the minds of the Esmeraldaites, and the fast glint of the knife forecast a revival of this primitive warfare. Those nearest along the bar were shocked into silence—a silence shattered by Pecos Thompson's pained bellow.

Bigfoot's eyes popped. A man down the bar dropped his whiskey glass. At that moment Waite Sitton, stopped in his tracks just inside the door, yelled.

The Slash 7 segundo saw old Dewlap, saw Pecos writhing, and pulled his six-shooter and lunged forward. It was Red River Regan's scream that turned him, brought his gun-muzzle from a fast target on Dewlap, as Waite Sitton looked back.

It could have been Sitton or Clancey Deal, but Red River was the nearest to old Wattles, coming through the door. Red River had a mop of blonde hair of which he was inordinately proud. Someone had jostled off his hat and the waving locks presented a temptation, which Wattles promptly fell heir to.

Both Deal and Regan had cleared their guns, as they charged on the heels of the segundo; hence were labeled combatants. Old Wattles grabbed at Red River's flowing mane, jerked a knife from his belt and closed in.

Mr. Regan had done his share of killing and was brave enough when a victim came under his flaming gun, but now the boot was on the other foot and Red River's scream was one of mortal terror. And then, in a twinkling, Red River Regan was minus a portion of his hair and a sizable chunk of skin.

THE Hairpin Kid, gun drawn, swept on past Wattles to side old Dewlap. Clancey Deal whirled, saw that waving knife, saw Red River weaving, looking like a decapitated rooster, his head covered with blood, and blew his top.

Clancey Deal forgot the gun in his hand, passing up the chance to pot-shoot old Wattles, and not only cleared the bar but landed on the back-bar ledge amidst the bottles and glassware.

For all of his bulk, Bigfoot Pike had a pip-squeak voice, which began to flute high notes as he saw a massacre unfolding that promised to eclipse anything the west had yet seen. The Boot Hill bar employed the usual female come-ons and these ladies in waiting had witnessed their share of brawls and so were not inclined to hysterics. However, when Red River lost his hair a buxom blonde scaled high C and held it.

Pecos Thompson's bawls drew the attention of Waite Sitton and the hawk-beaked man lurched around, bringing his six-shooter to bear on old Dewlap. The Hairpin Kid, fighting through the milling surge of bodies, brought his Colt down hard and the segundo went to the floor.

Now Esmeralda town, accustomed to saloon fights and accompanying gunfire, as it was, raised a startled and questioning eyebrow. Not a single gunshot had come from the Boot Hill bar—only yowls.

Jim Tasker had joined Sheriff Burge and Judge Lancey Frebold in front of the hotel. Slash 7 riders were bunched down the street, unaware that Jesse Slaughter's hell-riders were in town and deeply mystified by it all.

The sheriff had hardly finished informing the ranger of the recent arrival of Wattles and the Hairpin Kid when the first unearthly cry rent the air.

"Great Jehoshaphat!" gasped the sheriff.

"Catch on" said Jim Tasker, grim-toned. "Hellions by name; hellions by nature."

The exodus from the Boot Hill saloon across the way began shortly thereafter. The doors came off and men came out, those at the forefront violently impelled by those behind.

"They're scalpin' men an' takin' wimmen prisoners!" screeched a badly shaken onlooker.

"Good Lord!" moaned Judge Lancey Frebold.

When the saloon had cleared, Jim Tasker and his companions entered. Waite Sitton was on the floor, out cold. Pecos Thompson was still held prisoner by the deep-planted Bowie knife. Bigfoot Pike was leaning heavily on the bar, his head in his hands, staring at a wad of blond hair and what appeared to be a still-quivering piece of skin. Clancey Deal and Red River Regan had disappeared. In fact, historians record that neither were ever seen in Texas again.

Old Dewlap viewed his pards with a triumphant leer. "Ketched me a hoss-thief, by grab," he announced, brushing aside a portion of Pecos Thompson's shaggy hair and exposing the stub of a cropped ear.

"You've got more than a horse-thief," said Jim Tasker, "according to a recent statement by Nick Abo. He says now that it was Pecos who killed young Joe Slaughter at the start of the feud."

"Get me loose," moaned the bearded man. "I'm bleeding to death."

"That will never do, Pecos," said Judge Lancey Frebold, "for we want you to stand trial and hang, which will be the first strictly legal proceeding this law-abiding, God-fearing community has witnessed."

"Jist give a man rope enough," said old Wattles, "an' he'll git hisself snagged on a tombstun' every time."

When old Jesse Slaughter asked Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid what he could do to repay them, the Kid said, "If it ain't askin' too much, I wisht yuh could fix to send some swell parlor furniture back to Ma Tuttle at the Lazy Cross. She ain't never had none."

THE END

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Texan in Nebraska

HE TIED his horse in front of the square frame building marked COURT HOUSE and went inside, the heavy .45 knocking against his leg at each step. Some men took their guns off and stowed them in their soogans when they came into a strange town—but then it was always more conspicuous when they put them on again. He saw two loafers on the street stare at his gun and speak to each other about it, but he was walking straight in to the law and would precede tales, if any.

Inside the hall he saw a one-armed man with a deputy sheriff's badge carrying a wire basket full of papers. He touched the dep-

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Inside the hall he saw a one-armed man with a deputy sheriff's badge carrying a wire basket full of papers. He touched the dep-

uty's arm and said, "My name's Dugan Smith. I'm looking for a fella name of Jim Bell. I wonder if you know him?"

The deputy looked at Dugan's gun and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Jim Bell!" he repeated. "Now I can't say I know the feller. Rider or cowman?"

Dugan shook his head.

The deputy said, "Nester?"

Again Dugan shook his head. "He's probably a horse-breaker," he said.

"Horse-breaker," the deputy murmured. "Can't say I recall no horse-breakers, except maybe Professor Van Sickle. But he's an old hand here. Tell you what you do. Neal Boyce is tryin' a case here today. He's a lawyer; knows everybody. You go see him in the court clerk's office."

Dugan said, "Thanks," and went off down the hall, and the deputy's eyes followed the gun rather than the man. Dugan went into a room marked CLERK OF THE COUNTY COURT and saw no one behind the painted pine counter. A big man, dressed like a prosperous cattleman and chewing on a cigar, was leaning against the counter, studying some papers.

Dugan said, "Excuse me, I'm looking for a lawyer called Neal Boyce."

The man said, "I'm Boyce. What can I do for you?" His eyes, like the deputy's, dropped to the gun.

"My name's Dugan Smith. The deputy down the hall said you knew most everybody around here. I'm lookin' for a fella by the name of Jim Bell," Dugan said.

"You're from Texas, I guess," Boyce said, paying no attention to the question.

"If it makes any difference."

Boyce grinned. "Now I know you're Texas." He frowned. "Bell, Jim Bell. A nester, I guess." Dugan repeated what he had told the deputy, and Boyce looked at him shrewdly. "I suppose you've got personal business with him. I wouldn't tell you if I did know him, but it happens I don't. You better high-tail on out of town with that gun, young feller. This is Nebraska, not Texas."

"Suppose you mind your own damn business," Dugan said. "Sorry to of bothered you."

Boyce laughed and shuffled the papers together and put them in his pocket. "No bother. I guess you don't want a job?"

"You guessed right. Thanks."

"Suit yourself. But you'd be in better shape wearing that gun here if you were my man."

"I'll be my own man," Dugan said.

Again Boyce laughed. He started for the door.

"How much farther to the Niobrara River?" Dugan called after him.

"Which way did you come into town, Texas?" Boyce asked.

"From the South."

"Then you crossed it. The wooden bridge by the feed store."

"That little piddler?" Dugan said incredulously.

"Son, a million steers feed off the Niobrara watershed. There'd be more if it wasn't for the nesters." Boyce pointed to Dugan's gun again. "I'll try once more. I suppose you know how to use that implement, and you don't look like a drinker. It's worth forty a month and found if you'll ride fence for me."

"You're a lawyer," Dugan said. "You don't need a line rider."

Boyce grinned around the cigar and said, "That's right, I'm a lawyer. I run cattle, too—more cattle than any man on the Niobrara. I can't be two places at once." He jabbed Dugan in the chest with his big finger. "Get this, Texas. I can fight my own fights. You don't have to do anything I couldn't do myself. But I can't be two places at once."

"I guess you can do about everything else," Dugan said. "I guess you're just about the greatest man in the world."

Boyce colored and went out the door without another word. Dugan followed him. When he got to the street, still resenting the big man's authoritativeness and patronizing air, Boyce had disappeared. A tall, slouched man with a punched-in, battered hat with a high, tilted crown was standing beside Dugan's horse, fingering the worn saddle. He turned, showing a solemn, lantern-jawed face that had needed a shave for a week or two.

"Hello there, Dugan," he said. "I thought I recognized that rig."

"Hello, Pat," Dugan said. "You've lost weight."

THE tall man came up to the plank sidewalk, and they shook hands. Pat went on, "What brings you to this country?"

Dugan said, "I reckon you know, Shepherd."

Shepherd sensed the change in Dugan's attitude by his sudden shift to the use of the surname, but doggedly he said, "Look, Dugan. You've chased poor old Jim Bell over ten million miles of country. Ain't you ever going to let them two have no peace?"

Dugan hitched at his pants. "Let me alone, Pat," he said.

Pat threw up his hands. "All right! You still hitch at your pants when you're r'iled. I'll buy the beer and we'll say no more about it. Let's see. I saw you last at the Turnbuckle rodeo in New Mexico, wasn't it? Hell, that was a year and a half ago, wasn't it?"

They went down the sidewalk to Jerome's Saloon and went inside. The beer was lukewarm but wet and quenching, and they talked over it without mentioning Bell's name again. Pat Shepherd was foreman at Bob Munch's Circle Cross. It wasn't a good job because it wasn't a big spread, but he liked Munch, and there was a pair of Munch youngsters that took his fancy. It was hard for Dugan to think of Shepherd staying on a middlin' job because he liked a couple of kids, but he said nothing.

"I guess you're having nester troubles," Dugan offered.

Shepherd said, "Bob don't have no nester troubles. Bob don't have no trouble with nobody."

Dugan said, "I notice you left off wearin' a gun."

There was silence for several moments then.

"Mrs. Munch don't like it," Pat said at last.

They parted, without saying anything more about Jim Bell, and Pat offered to lend Dugan all the money he wanted up to ten dollars. Dugan needed it; he had thirty-odd cents lift in his jeans, and he had not eaten this day. But because he could not talk frankly, as Pat wanted to talk, he could not borrow his money.

He sat on a bench in front of the hotel and watched a string of "movers" amble down the street. There were three wagons and ten sorry-looking horses in the string. Only two of the wagons were covered, but even in the open one women and children rode. Walking plows—kidney-busters—with long, curved handles, and other farm implements were tied or wired to all rigs.

The movers appeared to be escorted by a sullen youth of seventeen aboard a branded roan pony. He, alone of all of them, seemed to know where he was going. Dugan got off the bench, hailed the youth and asked him where he could find Jim Bell.

The boy pulled up and wrinkled his forehead. "Jim Bell? Must be some rider. There's a lot of riders work around here that I don't know," he said. "Sorry!"

He touched his horse and rode on, and Dugan thought, That's the way it is with Jim Bell—the nesters think he's a cowman and the cowmen figger him for a nester. As he started back to the shade he saw Boyce come out of the hotel. The boy on the roan pony kicked it up a little faster and pulled in closer to his three wagons, as though to protect them.

Boyce had his teeth locked down over his cigar. He put his hands on his hips and said, to no one in particular, "There's the third outfit through here this week. Ten adults and a hundred and sixty acres apiece. There's sixteen hundred acres of range gone!"

His face slowly mottled. He started down the steps, his big hands clenched, as though to run after the homesteaders. Dugan watched him, half smiling at the idea that a man so strong should so give way to temper. At the foot of the steps, Boyce seemed to realize he looked foolish. He came back up on the porch and said, "You still around? Was it you I saw talkin' to that kid?"

"Yes," Dugan said. "I've got one more question. Do you know a fella by the name of Pat Shepherd?"

Boyce squinted at him sharply. "Yes. He's no good. Works for a no-good, nester-lovin' outfit. Friend of yours?"

Dugan leaned against the porch railing and watched the movers until they were across the small wooden Niobrara bridge, heading into the wild wealth of tall grass north and westward. I can put two and two together, he thought. Somewhere near where they'll stop, I'll find Jim Bell—and Ruth. They're somewhere about. Pat wouldn't have mentioned him so quick if he wasn't near. He was suddenly tense with the feeling that an eighteen-hundred-mile

chase was narrowed down now to ten or twenty miles. Pat had never been partial to nesters, but he had loved Jim Bell like a brother. If Jim was near, then that would explain why Pat worked for a nester-lovin' outfit.

He turned to Boyce and said, "Boyce, is that job still open?" The big man nodded. "But most people around here call me *Mister* Boyce," he said.

Dugan nodded. "I won't. Mebbe you better get used to it. Or have you got a front name? Mine's Dugan."

Boyce guffawed and put out his hand.

"We'll get along, Dugan. I feel better. I guess you're the man I been looking for."

"Well," Dugan said, "I know how you feel. Been looking for one myself for some time."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Men and Knives

NEAL BOYCE'S Double Diamond spread lay five miles outside town. It claimed five thousand acres. The river ran back of the house, with a hundred feet of tree-shaded park between. When Dugan rode in that night beside Boyce, his heart thrilled at the wealth of haystacks dotting the area about the place. Ten thousand cattle could winter in this south-sheltered river valley.

Boyce showed him where his line fence angled northwestward. "It goes straight as a crow flies for ten miles, then squares off northeastward, That's half of my diamond, two sides of it. Where the fence ends, you'll find Sugar Creek." Boyce spat. "Once it was just a fat place to water and winter. Now it's a a town, and when it's just a place to winter and water again, I'll finish my fence."

He told how his cattle repeatedly wandered through the three thousand acres that had been homesteaded on Sugar Creek, and how the nesters had killed one a year ago. They hadn't killed another, he said grimly. Dugan asked him why he didn't swing his fence around the settlement and Boyd said, "I'll go through! I was headed that way before they plowed there. I won't be the one to move."

He showed Dugan the bunkhouse, but when Dugan headed toward it, Boyce said, "No. You bunk with me." He led the way into the big, low, rambling house, shouting for his supper. Three Chinese servants ran to take his hat, to bring a basin of water for his evening wash. They blinked when they saw Dugan, and one of them brought him a basin, too. Another showed him his bedroom, a comfortable one at the back of the house, where he could hear the river talking.

The Double Diamond crew numbered ten at the supper table, and a nondescript lot they were. "This will be your new ramrod, boys," Boyce said, introducing Dugan, and only one man showed resentment that a stranger had been brought in to rule over them. He was a tall man, built like Pat Shepherd, and he went by the name of Cap Duncan. Dugan measured him for more of a man than the others.

In the morning there was a nip of autumn in the air, and the ten men were touched by it, and noisy as they scattered to their haying. Boyce said he would take Dugan out along the fence himself, and Dugan nodded, although he had wanted to make this first exploration alone.

They had followed the river all the way out from town the night before. Now they crossed it by Boyce's own bridge and rode northwestward along the fence, and fat cattle looked at them and went on pulling the rank grass. The land became more rolling, with little clumps of timber.

Suddenly Boyce cut away from it, and soon they came to the other leg of the fence, and followed it until Boyce pulled up at the top of a slope and pointed to the long thread of trees that marked Sugar Creek. Here, on both sides of the stream, the land had been freshly scarred this year by plows. Scattered houses put up plumes of smoke, and a man plowing with two yokes of oxen saw them and went into the house and got his rifle. He stood holding it, a quarter of a mile away, as they rode down into the "town."

There were two houses, a store and a blacksmith shop. A spring wagon stood before the blacksmith shop, and a little, fox-faced man was trying to climb up over the wheel into his rig. Fright made him awkward at it. Dugan saw Boyce redden with rage again. On the wagon was painted:

Prof. Homer Van Sickle, Trainer of Horses
Harness or Saddle
My Secret Methods Always Win!

Finding his seat, the professor snatched up the lines and flashed a terrified smile at Boyce.

"Mornin', Neal. I—I just happened to drive by here and I thought I loosened a tire. I—I—now that's a fact, Neal, I was just drivin' by," he chattered.

Boyce rode up and clutched him by the shirt front and snarled, "Now you want the nester business, do you? I'll smash every bone in your body if you don't *git!*"

The burly young blacksmith came out of the shop with a heavy hammer in his hand and Dugan tipped his gun out of the holster and slanted it his way. "Better not. He won't hurt the little fella," he said, and the blacksmith let the hammer drop at his side.

Boyce pushed the professor back into his seat. The little man snatched up his lines and whipped his two spiritless horses away in a cloud of dust, and Boyce said, "He ruins a horse anyway. Good riddance. Come on, Dugan." He rode away without a backward glance at the blacksmith, who went back into his shop.

The farms were packed one against another for five miles, and word of their passage seemed to go ahead of Boyce and Dugan. Children ran into the houses, women peered at them through unglassed windows and the men stood glowering in their yards. Everywhere, Dugan watched for Jim Bell but did not see him.

They turned their horses where the virgin sod began again, and headed back, and at the blacksmith shop, Dugan said, "I'll stop here, Neal. You go along." Boyce did not approve, but he was in a hurry to get back to court, and he said nothing. Dugan dropped down and tied his horse and went into the shop. The blacksmith came to meet him. A frightened woman with a baby had started toward the rear door. She screamed when she saw Dugan's gun, and stopped, and the blacksmith threw her a sick look of fear and entreaty before he turned again to Dugan.

"Get out!" he said thickly. "Don't start trouble."

Dugan put up both hands and said, "Take it easy, stranger. This ain't my day to pick. I'll prove it." He dropped one hand slowly and turned his belt around and stuffed the holstered gun in his hip pocket. Then he lowered the other hand. The woman seemed near to fainting with relief.

"You don't have to be sociable," Dugan went on, "but maybe I can ask a question."

HIS mouth was dry with eagerness as the blacksmith cocked his head suspiciously and said, "Go ahead," and let it drop there. The woman began to show fright again. Steps sounded outside, and Dugan's skin crinkled out of apprehension, because the air was charged with dislike of him and of everything belonging to or near to Neal Boyce. But he let the steps come closer until two men's shadows came through the door and spread over the ground beside him. Then he turned around.

Neither man was Jim Bell. But then he hadn't expected it. It was not Jim Bell's way to seek that kind of trouble, or any kind. It was an old, bearded nester and his red-faced son, a youth of twenty.

"Howdy, Clem. Howdy, Dill," said the blacksmith.

The old man said. "We seen Boyce's man stop here and we wondered if there might be some kind of trouble."

The blacksmith said, "Not so far."

The old man sighed, "I'm right glad to hear that. Plumb hate to see trouble start. I'll rest myself a mite, Lee. Set down, Dill." He dropped to a squat in the door, and his son, Dill, squatted on the opposite side, and as they moved, Dugan saw the shape of knives under their shirts.

"Tennessee men?" he asked.

Clem answered, "Sure 'nuff."

"My kin came from Tennessee," Dugan said. "My name's Dugan Smith."

The old man said coolly, "Pleased to meet you. Knowed some Smiths around Burning Bush. My name's Merchison." He did not offer to shake hands.

Dugan said, "My mother's people came from Burning Bush. It's a small world."

Merchison nodded.

Dugan turned back to the blacksmith. "Is there a man that can break horses around here without ruining them? Boyce tells me the professor is a horse-killer."

The blacksmith was about to answer, but he seemed to catch a warning glance from old Merchison. Merchison got up, came over, looked at Dugan and said, "Why do you want to see a horse-breaker? You break your own!"

Dugan backed away a step. Young Dill

Merchison stood up lithely and edged around behind Dugan. Dugan said, "Don't you start anything against a man with a gun, you damned fools! I'm from Texas, and I've fought more knives than you've got."

He backed slowly toward the door, and the three men made a triangle in front of him, with the woman an odd angle outside.

Dugan said, "Ma'am, I didn't come for trouble. I won't make any."

She suddenly screamed, "Then why don't you go? Why don't you go back to Boyce's and leave us alone?" She broke into sobs but stubbornly remained there, clinging to her baby.

"Let me! You take care of Cissy," old Clem Merchison said, as the blacksmith, made furious by his wife's fear, started blindly toward Dugan. The blacksmith responded to the old man's authority. He went over to his wife and squeezed her arm. She calmed, and he took his hand away.

Merchison pulled at his beard. "Why does a cowboy want to see a horse-breaker, answer me that?" he asked Dugan.

To Dugan, it confirmed what he thought he had learned from Pat Shepherd. There *was* a horse-breaker among the nesters.

"I knew a horseman by the name of Jim Bell," he said. "I've come a long way to meet him. No, you won't know him by that name. But you know the one I mean. About my age, but some bigger. Good looking. Sings and plays the guitar. Always has a joke or two to tell, and won't overwork. Dresses like a Saturday-nighter. I'll run into him sometime, Merchison."

The blacksmith started to explode into a tirade, but Merchison broke in calmly, "I guess you will, Smith. Today's as good a day as any. Come along." Again the blacksmith started to protest, but the old man overruled him with, "Take care of Cissy, Lee. Miz Crawford, nothin's going to happen." He nodded to Dugan. "Come along."

THE two Merchisons had tied their horses a half-block down the street, just in case there would be trouble in the smithy. All three mounted and headed northward across open prairie, crossed the creek, and found a road that led away from the farms on the other side of the river. There were two ruts; Dugan rode in one, with the Merchisons single file in the other, covering him front and back.

"This fellow, Jim Ring, he kind of answers to the picture you give of Jim Bell, and it's the kind of a name a man would choose if he changed quick, without thinkin'," Merchison said. "If he's no older than you, he's aged faster. If he was bigger, he's lost weight. Never hear him joke, and I cain't call him a dresser. He works, too. But he does sing and play the guitar—or did."

There was no excitement in Dugan any more. At the moment, he had forgotten what Jim Bell looked like. He had even forgotten what Ruth Barrow looked like. He relaxed in the saddle and played his mind across his hate as Jim Bell used to play his nimble fingers over the strings and frets of the guitar. He remembered a night two years ago, when he had taken Ruth to the box supper at the Indian Junction school. That was down in Texas. That was during the full of the spring moon. That was when he and Jim Bell and Pat Shepherd were working for E. C. Shawhan, and folks called them the "Three Red Jacks." For a second, Ruth's pretty, freckled face flashed moonlit across his mind, and the whole remembered evening unraveled.

Jim and Pat had gone to the box supper stag. They got drunk and were ejected, and he could not go to their rescue because of Ruth. He had one of E. C. Shawhan's horses for her, and after the box supper they started home together. It was their first night alone, and now it was recognized that they were "going steady," but he had been too worried about Pat and Jim to enjoy it as they should.

As they had crossed the T&P tracks they heard music, and Dugan had turned his horse and spurred up the tracks, for a moment forgetting the girl. She followed, and there under the water tower they found Jim Bell and Pat Shepherd. Pat was sleeping peacefully, but Jim was stroking his guitar and singing to the moon with his golden voice:

*"Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay!*
*Canta y no llores,*
*Por-que can ta—"*

*"Cielito Lindo."* Dugan said aloud, and old Merchison said, "How's that?" and the whole moonlit picture vanished, and it felt

like someone had reached into cold fires inside of him and prodded them into flames again.

Merchison repeated, "How's that? You said something."

Dugan replied, "*Cielito Lindo.* It means 'Beautiful Heaven.' It's the name of a Mexican song."

Merchison said, "Oh!" and his son spoke for the first time: "Jim Ring knows a lot of them Mexican songs, but I never could tolerate furrin music. I got to know what the words mean."

They were coming to a little clump of trees that would be ideal shelter for a small house in this northern country. Dugan abruptly shifted the gun around in front of him again, saying, "Sometimes you're better off not to know what the words mean, bub." Just then the small house did appear —as he knew it would—in the midst of the trees.

Clem Merchison dropped back beside Dugan. "I'll ride on ahead and tell 'em they got company. What did you say your name was?"

Dugan saw the dun-colored horse at that moment, and instinctively pulled up, and just then a rifle cracked and a slug screamed past his ear.

He dropped off his horse, wondering why he felt like smiling. That would be Pat Shepherd with the rifle, because the dun-colored horse was a cowhorse, with a stock rig and a worn riata on the horn, and a nester like Jim Bell—or Jim Ring—would not have such a horse, nor such a rig on it.

The rifle cracked again, and his horse danced wildly, and it was all he could do to hold it. He dug in his heels and leaned back on the reins, and old Clem Merchison spurred his horse ahead yelling at the top of his voice.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Hunter

PAT came out of the little cabin with the rifle in both hands and yelled back, "Clem, you old fool, what'd you bring him here for?" Clem said something to him while Dugan was quieting his horse.

Reluctantly, Pat called, "All right, Dugan. Come on, but don't try nothing. I'm going to keep you covered and I ain't going to give you no chance to snake out that .45 of yours. If you make one fool move I'll blow a hole through you. You know I'll do it, too, Dugan."

Dugan said, "I know you would, Pat. You always were a whizzer when you had the drop." He got on his horse and fought it toward them, and it spooked again and again at the smoke-smell of Pat's rifle. Pat rolled a cigarette with one hand, ready to drop it if need be.

"You had no call to say that, Dugan," he muttered. "Jim ain't here. Ruth is. Do you want to see her?"

Dugan shook his head. Through the trees he saw marks of raw dirt, and it amused him to think of Jim Bell working between the handles of a kidney-buster plow. There was not much to the house, although its location was ideal. Jim's unhandy tool-work showed in the irregular ax-marks on the logs. It was poorer than any place along Sugar Creek, and it did not even have the advantages of the creek's water.

"He crawled in and pulled the hole in after him, I see," Dugan said.

"You had no call to say that!" Pat snapped. Suddenly the muzzle of the rifle came up. "Get off your horse. No, get down and come with me. You came here to see how Jim was gettin' along. Well, you're goin' to see."

"If that's the way it is—"

"That's the way, Dugan."

"Always before, you wouldn't take sides, Pat."

"I never had to. Come on."

Dugan dropped down and walked ahead of Pat, past the mean little cabin, with the rifle never more than six inches from the small of his back. A rope clothesline had been stretched between two small trees, and a pair of patched levis were hanging from it, dripping fresh rinse-water. There was a well, a corral with a lame mare and a pig in it, and three haystacks protected by pole fences. Beyond that was a small strip of plowed ground. Beyond that, the limitless prairie swelled.

Ruth suddenly stepped out of the door and said, "Hello, Dugan," in a quiet voice, and Dugan stared at her, choking with rage against Jim Bell. He was glad that the Merchisons had not followed, and he wished Pat were not here. He wished he could have seen her first without her knowing

she was seen, to get used to it. He wished. . . .

It wasn't a dress she had on, but something that had once been one. Her brown hair was pulled back in a knot on the nape of her neck, and the freckles he remembered were lost now in the windburned tan that made her look old and worn and haggard. Once she had had a smiling mouth; it was pulled down at the corners now, in lines of sadness and weariness.

A baby cried fretfully in the house. Pat Shepherd touched her arm and said, "Go take care of the baby, Ruth."

She shook her head. "You see about it, Pat. There's nothing wrong with it except you've got it spoiled." He shook his head, and she smiled wanly. "Go on, Pat. What do you think Dugan's going to do—shoot me? Let me talk with him a little."

THE big rifle looked foolish in Pat's hands then, and he went in awkwardly, and Dugan heard him speaking just as awkwardly to the baby. It stopped crying and began to laugh and gurgle. The sound was embarrassing to Dugan, who had been so recently remembering *Cielito Lindo* under the T&P water tank.

"Well, Duge?"

He started at the nickname, it was so like the old Ruth, who had never had time or seriousness for more than one-syllable names. He found himself disliking her. No woman should decline so far so fast, even when chained to an irresponsible weakling like Bell. He did not know what to say, although his sympathy had passed so far away that he would not have felt badly about hurting her a little with bluntness. It was just that he had nothing to say to this woman.

"Well, Duge? I guess Jim was right. I never thought you'd follow us. If I had, believe you me, we'd have stopped a long time ago. Duge, are you still mad at Jim and me?"

"I wouldn't call it mad," he said carefully.

For the first time, she showed concern.

"Dugan! You're not! You didn't *really* follow us to—to—" He gave her no answer, not even a nod, but she burst out, "You really do intend to kill Jim! Why?"

"Look at yourself, Ruth," he said.

Her hands fluttered mechanically to her hair. "I—I haven't been well," she said. Then a look of horror crossed her face as she forced herself to believe. She came close to him. "Duge! You're not! You can't! Oh, Duge, you're a gunman now—I see it, I see it, and I know why! That's what is different about you! You always were good with a gun, but—"

"Jim was pretty good," he reminded her.

"Jim?" she said scornfully. "It was a trick with him; Jim shot tomato cans by the thousand. He couldn't hurt a kitten. And you want to kill him? Because he stole your girl? Because he won and you lost?" He shrugged, and she suddenly threw out her arms to indicate how unattractive she was. "Look at me! Would you kill a man—Jim—anyone for the likes of *me?*"

"That's more like you," he said, before he thought. He was sorry he framed the old and the new Ruth together that way. He licked his lips and lined out the words he wanted and gave them to her deliberately. "Here's how it is. If you had come to me and told me you wanted him instead of me, you know I wouldn't have made trouble. Sure, I wouldn't like it! But I can take my licking if it's a fair one. If you had told me you wanted to get married—if you had let me know afterward—if you had not run away, and kept on running away—California, Arizona, New Mexico, Indian Territory, Arizona again, Colorado, Wyoming—now you're grubbing like an immigrant on somebody else's range in Nebraska. . . ."

She tried to interrupt, but he held fast to his train of thought: "Ruth, I'm glad I followed you, and here's why: Because many's the time I thought, 'What if I find them and don't give a damn? What if I get set down to a meal with them and then ride on?' I knew all along it wasn't your way, to run away. I knew it was Jim's way, but I didn't know how much he had changed you. You used to have lots of spunk. Jim made you like himself."

She whimpered, "And maybe Jim's made himself like I used to be."

He pointed to the yawning back door. "You haven't even got a door to keep the winter out. Just a hole in the wall. That's Jim's way, not yours. Where is he?" He found himself choking and trembling

again, and remembering Jim Bell's form and features. "Where is he? Where's he hiding, Ruth?"

She studied him intently; he could almost feel her asking questions behind her narrowed eyes.

"You ought to realize now that it won't do any good to hide. Where did he go?"

"You want to kill him?" she whispered.

He wanted, momentarily, to give her the thing she most wanted, but he tightened his nerve as he had tightened it for two years and said, "Maybe. He's got it coming. But I'm not an executioner . . . maybe. I don't know what I'll do. Maybe I'll just slap him."

She flinched. "Oh no, Duge! That—that would be the last straw. That would kill him!"

"He'd have to draw or beg off, wouldn't he? And he hasn't got the guts to know what to do!" he said.

Suddenly she turned around and called through the door, and there was hysteria in her voice. "Pat! Pat, come out here!" The baby howled as Pat set it down inside, and he came to the door with the rifle in his hand, looking foolish. "Kill him," she said. "Shoot him! He's crazy, Pat!" The tall cowboy stood there looking at her with pity, his Adam's apple working. Ruth whirled and pulled at the butt of Dugan's gun, screaming, "Kill him! Kill him!"

"Ruth!" Dugan said sharply.

PAT gave him a black, warning look. The two Merchisons came through the trees and around the corner at a dog-trot. The woman broke into hysterical sobbing and clutched at Pat's arm for support. Out of the corner of his mouth, Pat whispered a foul name at Dugan, but Dugan paid no attention.

"Take her into the house, Pat," he said.

"Take her into the house, Clem," Pat said, and the two Merchisons helped her inside. "Keep your hands away from your gun, Dugan. You're just about low-down enough that I *could* shoot you."

"I'm going," Dugan said. Pat's face lit up. Dugan shook his head. "No, I'm going to see Jim. I didn't mean I was leaving the country. I mean I'm not going to make it any harder on Ruth."

"That's right manly!" Pat said sarcastically, gesturing with the rifle. "Git going!"

"Ah, Pat, put down that gun! You're not going to shoot me and I'm not going to shoot you. I said I'm going." He started back for the horses, and Dill Merchison bobbed watchfully out of the front door. Dugan felt his temper slipping. He slid his gun out of the holster and tipped it toward the youth and snarled, "Make yourself scarce, kid. I've had all the lip I want from you." Dill vanished.

Pat followed Dugan to the horses and stood there building a cigarette while he untied and mounted.

"I hate it about Ruth," Dugan said. "I didn't want to hurt her particularly." Uncertainty made him lose his thought, and as he groped for it a new one took its place. "All right. Tell her I won't kill him. I promise it."

Pat looked troubled. "That won't do any good, Dugan."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's this way, Dugan. Why don't you just pull out and be done with it? Ruth—well, she don't want you and Jim ever to meet."

"Why?" Dugan asked.

Pat went on slowly, "Partly because you was sidekicks once and she thinks it would hurt Jim to see you. Partly because you'd mebbe bait him, mebbe slap him like you said. Jim—well, you know Jim—that would about break his nerve forever, so he never would hold up his head again. Partly she hopes some day you two can make it up."

Dugan thought it over. "Those aren't the real reasons. The main one is she don't want me to see what Jim looks like now," he blurted.

Pat reddened angrily. "You're so high and mighty!" he rasped. "Well, mebbe that is partly it. No woman wants her man to look cheap." Their eyes met and contested silently. Pat went on earnestly, "Jim's a—well, I'll tell you the truth, Dugan. Jim never did have much git-up-and-go. He kind of went to pieces while they was runnin' around from hell to breakfast. But Dugan, now you've brung it up, *here's* what breaks Ruth's heart! Jim's braced up here. He's took up land. He's never did that before. He didn't aim to run no farther. If you'd come around a

year from now, it wouldn't matter whether you two met or not, because he'd have his feet under him. Ruth's afraid he'll cave in and want to run off again."

He gulped. ". . . Maybe without her," he added. "They've got a start. Jim won six hundred-odd dollars at Cheyenne, at the round-up. They had a couple of hundred that Ruth saved. He's—well, he's got big ideas. He don't want to dirt-farm. He wants to lease some of this range from the Indians northeast and run a few beeves. Dugan," he pleaded, "give him a chance to work it out."

The weakness and indecision had passed. Dugan shrugged. "How's a man going to raise the money for beeves if he can't look a man in the eye? I don't owe either of 'em anything, but you can tell Ruth I won't kill him. Lord A'mighty," he snarled, his rage rising unexpectedly, "I trailed him for two years!"

He whirled the horse and rode away without looking back. He swung off the dimly-rutted twin trails, seeking to miss Sugar Creek's settlement altogether and ride in across Boyce's range, but when he was less than a mile from the road he saw a horseman angling toward him, waving.

He recognized the blacksmith and pulled up, waiting with his hand on his gun. Crawford had a poor horse, a harness-scarred work animal. He was armed, too, with a .44 stuck in the front of his grimy bib overalls.

Dugan, mistrusting the look on his face, covered him. "I'd have to kill you if you went for that hogleg, friend," he said. "It's better if you don't get any ideas. You're a family man."

"What happened?" Crawford said.

Dugan laughed. "You nesters do stick together! Well, nothing much happened. Your Tennessee friends probably are not far behind me. Jim Ring wasn't home. I'm going to borrow that gun of yours a minute."

He spurred close and lifted the .44 from its holster. He could see the blacksmith tighten momentarily as they came close, as he studied the possibility of clinching. Dugan moved in and out again with the gun, and the blacksmith's chance to jump him never materialized.

"I'll drop this about a hundred yards down, and you come pick it up. Then you can go on over to Jim's and see for yourself."

He cantered off slowly. The face of the blacksmith's wife came to his mind, and blended with Ruth's so that he lost the details of both, and remembered only the vague, weeping outline of someone crying in terror for her husband. He stopped and leaned over and dropped the gun gently and then straightened up in the saddle and called to Crawford.

"I tell you, why don't you go get your wife and take her over with you? Mrs. B—I mean, Mrs. Ring—is all upset."

The blacksmith did not answer, but the next time Dugan looked back, just before he crossed the creek a mile above the settlement, he saw him pounding his bony little plow-horse back toward his blacksmith's shop.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Challenge

DUGAN went back to the Double Diamond. One of the hands angled toward him, as though to ask for instructions, but he went straight into the house, to his room. The Chinese cook asked him if he wanted something to eat. He shook his head and sat down on the bed, and was suddenly so weak he had to bury his face in his hands. Another Chinese knocked on the door and opened it and asked if Dugan were sick. He said no, and asked where Boyce was. Boyce was still in town, the servant said.

Dugan went out and got a fresh horse and rode into town. He found Boyce at the livery stable.

"Neal, it's been three years since I was drunk. It'll probably be three more before I'm drunk again. Tonight I'm going to get drunk. I'll be on the job in the morning if you want me, but I thought I ought to tell you," he said.

"Woman?" Boyce asked. Getting no answer, he went on, "I reckon you've flushed your game. Here." He handed Dugan a five-dollar gold piece. "You'll need that to get drunk on. If you're not on the job in the morning, there won't be no job."

Dugan was out of drinking practice, but the liquor did not numb him as it should have. He let his horse take him home, with

no more than a black eye to show for his night. It would have been worse, only One-Eye Jerome, the saloon keeper, had interfered, saying, *"Cut it out! He's Boyce's man!"* Dugan remembered that happening, but not much else except that *Cielito Lindo* kept running through his mind all night.

Daylight was just breaking when he reached the ranch. He turned his horse loose in the corral, went back of the house to the river, undressed and waded in. The icy water was agonizing, and for all his violent exercise seemed to do him little good. Yet when he stepped out and dressed his mind was clearer. Cap Duncan came out of the bunkhouse, yawning. He grinned when he got a good look at Dugan's face.

"You can quit grinnin' like a chessy-cat," Dugan said. "Neal knows I got drunk. I'm still on the job."

"I don't care about your job and I don't care about you a whole lot, come to think of it," Cap retorted, shedding the grin. "If you're on the job, you can just run her today, and I'll be one of the cheap hands, how's that? I figgered maybe you'd been havin' yourself a time and would pass a civil word about it."

He pointed to the black eye, and Dugan realized it should have been good bunkhouse gossip and a tale to get him started right with the men. Cap had only been friendly. I've got a carbuncle in my guts, with the core in my brain, and I guess I don't care. This is how a rattlesnake feels, he thought, stalking to the house without trying to square himself with Cap.

Boyce was still snoring, but the three Chinese were having tea. One jumped up and clattered the coffee pot on the stove. He went into the living room, and another Chinese slithered after him and said, "Mis' Shep, he leavy dis you," and with a series of bobs and bows pushed a folded paper into Dugan's hand. Dugan took it to the window, unfolded it and stared at the writing a long time:

*Dugan:*

*Dont come round the house again. You ort to be man enough not to pick on Ruth. I wont run away no more. So if you want to meet me, say where. But dont come around my place again. Ive got a gun and when I see you Im goin to pull down on you. Thats fair warnin if thats what you want. You can forget what Ruth and Pat said, I dont ask anything from you Dugan so Hop to it.*

*Jim Bell.*

Jim had scrawled his name, his real one, defiantly. But the letter itself had come hard. Jim had not even felt that way when he wrote it. He would feel less that way when he met Dugan, gun or no gun. Nobody knew better than Jim Bell how much superior Dugan was with any kind of a gun.

Dugan tore the paper into bits and threw them in the cold fireplace. He ate a big breakfast, forcing it down, tamping it down with black coffee laced with the hair of the dog that bit him, and went outside with a headache to see the gang scattering to their work.

Dugan had been foreman on other ranches. Throughout southern Texas he was known as an able round-up boss—big operations involving a hundred men always. Now he found himself fighting to "size up" what needed to be done. The men hung back, waiting for orders; they had heard from Cap Duncan and would have to be told. This was how men made it tough for a ramrod.

He told them what to do and when one of them started to tell about some unfinished job from yesterday, Dugan asked, "Is that what you're supposed to do? Then why wasn't you doin' it, instead of waiting for me?" The cowboy drawled, "Shucks, boss, I had to hear it from your own ruby lips," and two of the men made sure Dugan saw them hiding broad smiles.

Dugan baited the cowboy, "You're a cunning little rascal, Slim. Some day I'll probably have to trim you down to boy size."

Slim pulled thoughtfully at his nose. "What's the matter with right now, kiddo? I'll just match that eye for you."

HE JUMPED, swinging, and with a whoop the others gathered around. Neal Boyce came charging out the front door as they closed. Slim would be the bunkhouse bully, the strong man, the outfit's fistic champ, Dugan knew; trimming the boss down to size was a job that always fell to such. And Slim was strong, fast, and courageous, but he was a local champion with local experience. Dugan knew the

smart thing to do was stand him off and cut him down, but this morning he wanted to do it the hard way. In his time, he had been whipped by poorer fighters than Slim—but a long, long time ago. He had wandered farther, been a stranger in more places, been whipped oftener, fought more fights, learned more than Slim. He bored in and let Slim wrap one big arm around his head. He waited for Slim's uppercut to start before exploding with his own fists. He let his body go slack and limp, and when Slim's fist started he dug his toes in and threw him off balance and kept him off balance by hitting him.

He knocked the cowboy down without too much trouble, and with only a trickle of blood from his own nose to pay for it. He started to give the man a hand up; he was on the verge of saying, "Ah, cut it out—don't spoil my luck—I'm going to quit while you're down—" But as usual, his mind slipped away from where he was, and he saw Ruth's worn, pitiful face, and remembered Jim's pathetic letter, with its thick layer of bravado and the hopeless, suicidal terror underneath.

He said, "Get up, Slim, and let's cut out this foolishness. If I couldn't lick you I wouldn't be boss here. You would." It was as near as he could come to a generous statement. Slim stumbled up and went to get his team harnessed; he was a coward, after all, and would probably draw his pay and slip away one of these days. The other men went to work grimly, not bothering to make it tough for Dugan. Slim might be a coward, but he was *their* coward; Dugan was a stranger who had been unnecessarily brutal.

"You've got things pretty well in hand, I see," Boyce said, with a smile. Dugan stared at him, realizing slowly that Boyce had enjoyed Slim's downfall. So Boyce was a bully, too, and probably a coward at heart, to boot. However, he was stronger than Slim physically, he was rich and powerful, politically; his streak of cowardice was well covered, and he might go through life without ever exposing it. And people would think he was a great jigger.

"That's the only way to handle these ten-dollar stiffs!" Boyce approved jovially, and Dugan understood why Cap Duncan was the only good man on the Double Diamond. Good men sought a different kind of boss.

While the crew made hay, Dugan made himself acquainted with the Double Diamond. Boyce had brought in black Angus bulls and the blood was beginning to show. The farther he rode, the more Dugan was impressed with what Boyce owned, and the harder it was to conceive of a lawyer acquiring, owning and running it. He remembered Boyce's boast—he could do anything there was to be done except be in two places at once. The Double Diamond proved a man could dig into law books and unearth a fortune.

Yet suddenly Dugan began to see other, scattered homesteads, laid out willy-nilly through the empire Boyce had planned as his own when he imported the Angus blood. He met two teen-age kids, a girl and a boy with one horse between them, standing guard over twenty acres of squaw-corn because their father did not have money enough for a fence to keep out the Double-Diamond cows.

"What do you do at night?" he asked them curiously.

They answered solemnly, never taking their eyes from his Double Diamond horse, "Pop camps here nights."

"I bet that's a lonesome way to live."

They shook their heads; apparently Pop had not complained. He rode on. That was what Ruth had to look forward to—that is, if she was lucky. Her man must sleep out in the corn—that is, if he made a corn crop. Dugan grinned without mirth at the thought of Jim Bell raising corn. Why, that black velvet vaquero suit he had bought in Nogales, that orange silk scarf he used to wear—forty acres of corn would just about pay for them!

HE SAW a man on a pinto riding toward him, and he pulled up and waited because it was sociable and customary, not because he wanted company. It was a good horse, but a poor saddle, and a pot-bellied, tobacco-chewing man who rode it. The brand was the same as Pat Shepherd's horse: Circle Cross.

"Howdy. I guess you must be Neal Boyce's new man," said the stranger, putting out his hand. "I'm Bob Munch. A friend of yours runs my outfit for me. He said you blowed in. Kind of funny you two would turn up foremen on the same range, ain't it?"

If he thought it funny, his attitude did not show it. Pat, then, had told him about Dugan's pursuit of Jim Bell. Munch was a cattleman, with everything to lose at the advent of nesters, but he was not fighting them. Looking at him, Dugan knew he would not fight them.

Munch seemed to sense Dugan's thoughts, for he said uneasily, "I been tryin' for years to get Neal to go in with me and patent this range and buy out these nesters and throw a fence around it. All but them along Sugar Creek, I mean. That can be farmed, and should be. Here they're just spoilin' good range. I hope you can see your way clear to back me up."

He went on to explain his plan, and it was a sensible one—only of course the nesters wouldn't sell. Dugan had seen *that* tried before, too. When nesters settled on non-paying land, they stayed until they starved out. That's what made them nesters. Once they got a plow-point in the ground—

He said as much, and Munch sighed, "I reckon you're right. I wish they had more sense. They're just makin' it tough on all of us."

"What'll you do when the range is all pocketed up with farms, and the good range is gone?"

"Move to the Black Hills. They cain't plow them slopes!"

Dugan rode over to Munch's place and met Mrs. Munch and the two kids that had taken Pat's fancy. They were awed by him; they kept staring at his gun, and they did not want to get too close to him. Somehow he did not care that they thought him a murderous rowdy who was making life miserable for Ruth Bell—or Ring, as they knew her. Well, they had not known Ruth in Texas, either! They had not followed Jim Bell for two years, either.

Pat Shepherd rode in, and Dugan went out and got on his horse immediately. The two kids went running to Pat, and over their hugs he grinned at Dugan like old times, saying, "Old maverick he-goat like me has to borry other people's kids. I must be gettin' old, Dugan."

Dugan heard himself murmur, "You're a family man at heart. Never thought of it before, but you ought to have some of your own." Like old times, he grinned back. "Maybe you ought to take up land, Pat. I will if you will. You and me and Jim." After that it wasn't so much like the old days, but it was truer to fact.

Pat shook his head. "Pshaw! I never would dare to try to support a family. It really scares me. Reckon I do remarkable well to keep patches on my britches." Then his manner changed. "You got that fool note?" Dugan nodded yes, and Pat said, "Wasn't that a fool thing for him to do? It was the easiest way out, to take it to you." And as Dugan said nothing, Pat suddenly exclaimed, "Now you won't let that all-fired idiot come at you with a gun, Dugan!"

The two Munch kids got out of the way, wise as a dog to the change in a tone of voice. Dugan knew better than to argue or explain it to Pat, but he tried: "You're too long away from Texas, Pat. If we was all back there, Ruth's folks would have killed Jim long ago."

"Now there's poor folks in Texas, too!"

"I dare him to take her back and say that!"

Pat's face fell, but he came up and leaned against the horse and looked up soberly. "You always was too good of an arguer for me, Dugan, and for all I know, you could be right. What I'm sayin' is this—*don't you lift a hand to Jim Bell.* I'm on his side if you do."

Dugan had never liked Pat as much as he did then. Funny how you could ride with a man as many years as he had been with Pat and Jim, and still not know them. Pat was more than a family man at heart; he just naturally had to have someone to look after. For two years he had been looking after Jim and Ruth. Thinking they were on their feet at last, he had transferred his concern to the two Munch kids. Dugan remembered the two or three times he had met Pat over the last two years. It had seemed like accident then, but of course it wasn't. He remembered the Turnbuckle rodeo, in New Mexico, and how Pat had persuaded him to stay there an extra two weeks. Probably he had been close to Jim and Ruth then, and faithful, loyal old Pat had doubled back and lied like a trouper, saying, "Dugan, I wonder what ever did happen to them two snakes in the grass, Jim and Ruth?"

Of course, Pat was almost as big a fool as Jim Bell.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Ambush

ON THE way home, Dugan kept turning it over and over in his mind, and halfway there he made up his mind to pick up his horse and head south. He could send back the money Boyce had advanced him from somewhere. For a moment he was eager to go, and then he recalled he was leaving Ruth, and he saw both Ruths at once. It was near sunset, and he was trotting down the long slope into the sun, and somehow the prairies got the Texas mesa-look for a moment, and *Cielito Lindo* ran nimbly through his mind. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes and choked: "Ruth! . . . Ruth!—Ruth!" The agony left him quickly, but he knew then that he could not go south without squaring it with Jim. They had all overlooked one thing. Ruth was his girl, and he still loved her. He took out his gun and snapped two shots at buffalo bean pods, and the thought came back to him: this is how a rattlesnake feels. . . .

Boyce came out on the porch and said, "Well, what do you think of my place?"

Dugan said, "Pretty good spread you've got."

Boyce said, "What do you think of bringing in those Angus quarter-bloods and offering a few cull heifers for sale?"

Dugan paused on the porch, fingering his gun-butt and trying to drag his mind back to what Boyce was saying.

"I'll have to think that one over. Depends on how much feed is in sight," he stalled.

He went into the house, leaving Boyce standing there annoyed. He told the three Chinese, "Don't fix me any supper. My stomach feels like an Indian smells." They went ahead and fixed his supper anyway, while he changed clothes. His fawn skin-tights were creased but they were his dressiest pants; matter of fact, he had bought them to look handsome for Ruth. He put them on, and his brown silk shirt with the yellow horseshoe embroidered on it, and his yellow scarf. He brushed his hat and shined his boots and at the last moment noticed how badly he needed a shave. But the Chinese were already banging the dinner triangle.

Last of all he gave his gun a once-over lightly cleaning, trying its action delicately and finding it just right. He buckled the worn belt around him, wishing it had the class to go with his outfit. On his way out he glanced in the glass and straightened his scarf, and one of the Chinese giggled admiringly.

He grinned a stiff grin and said, "There used to be three of us rannies traveled together. I was always the homely one, or I guess maybe I just didn't care to fix up, or know how. You ought to see them other two now. Ain't I the prettiest son-of-a-gun you ever saw?"

The Chinese nodded and giggled and ran to his own room. He came back with a scarlet silk cord, and Dugan let him wrap it around the crown of his hat for a band.

By then Dugan was too nervous to prolong it, and he went off and left the Chinese jabbering about supper. Boyce was late, too, and when Dugan got outside he saw why. Professor Homer Van Sickle was there bowing and whispering, and one of the hands was turning his team into the corral.

"All dressed up!" Boyce said. "You're not going out again tonight? I thought you wasn't a roisterer."

"We all make mistakes," Dugan said irritably. He had not realized how keyed-up he was. The last thing in the world he wanted was to be distracted by quarreling with Boyce. "I'm not drinking tonight, you can bet your boots on that!"

He started away, but Boyce called after him sharply, "Dugan!" He stopped on the steps. "You'd better have some supper before you go."

"I can't eat, Neal." Dugan was determined not to have this prolonged. "Let the professor eat my share."

"Oh, I eat with the crew. More at home there," the professor hastened to say.

Dugan turned away again, but Boyce came down and laid his heavy hand on his shoulder and said, "Wait a minute! The professor brought some word that concerns you, Dugan. Did you have some trouble with those Sugar Creek nesters, Merchison and Crawford and that bunch?"

Dugan said, "It might be trouble to some people," and tried to go again, but Boyce jerked him back and said, "Wait a minute! They've got vigilantes or something or-

ganized there against you. Wasn't that it, Professor?"

"They're keeping a twenty-four hour watch, that's all I picked up. Where they are, I don't know," the professor said.

Dugan looked at him in disgust and thought, That's how you square yourself with Boyce after trying to steal a little business from the nesters. And still you have to eat with the help! The thought of this greasy, furtive little man, a parasite who used drugs and probably crueler things on horses for a living, bringing warning to him enraged him.

While he was choking over his anger Boyce was saying, "We had some trouble with those knife-toting Merchisons once before. I'd like nothing better than to catch them organizing against one of my men. I don't want to know anything about your personal affairs, but let's figger something out on this. If we can get rid of the Merchisons, I'll have Sugar Creek clear in a year."

Dugan pulled away and started toward the corral and Boyce roared after him, "Dugan!" He kept walking and Boyce raised his voice another notch: "Dugan!" He kept on walking. He got his own horse out, saddled and bridled him quickly, and headed for the gate. Boyce leaped down off the porch and ran angling to intercept him, and they met at the gate.

"Where are you headed? Sugar Creek?" He was more excited now than angry; he was a lawyer, and he could think fast. Dugan nodded because it was the easiest way out, and Boyce pulled at his lip in thought before going on: "I wish you'd use some sense. I wish you'd wait. We ought to plan this, but I reckon you won't. You damned hot-headed Texans! Would a hundred dollars make you change your mind? I was afraid not! All right, all right, all right! We mebbe can do something with this yet. . . ."

HE RAN back to the house and Dugan put his horse to a gentle lope. Tense as he was, solemn and awed as he felt at the approach of his meeting with Jim Bell, he had to smile at the thought of the Double Diamond crew coming to his "rescue." Boyce would have to roar at them, too. They had no loyalty to their ranch, less to their foreman. And yet likely Boyce could rout them out.

His own uncle had once run a bunch of nesters, fourteen families, half way across Texas, Dugan remembered. Their hold on the land was always precarious, and a hard shove, a good scare, at the right moment sent them flying.

The "town" of Sugar Creek looked insignificant indeed as he passed it in early moonlight. He had been in this country less than sixty hours now, and yet the smithy, the store and the two houses seemed like old landmarks to him. Bob Munch had been right—Sugar Creek was good farming country, would raise good grain feed. Neal Boyce was right too, because he would inherit Sugar Creek one way or another. And probably raise grain for his blooded Angus cattle on soil the nesters had first opened with their plows.

The whole picture flitted through his mind, and it was the picture of every acre of land in the west. The strong white men took it from the weak Indians, and then the strongest white men pushed out the weaker. When range got poor and overstocked, the cattlemen weakened and the nesters pushed them out, and all the wars in the world could not prevent it—and never had. When nesters moved in where cattlemen had the range to stay strong, their own weakness made them easy to dislodge.

He splashed through the creek above the settlement and cut over to Jim's newly-rutted road. Long trails had toughened his horse, two days rest had freshened it, and it seemed to him he could see Ruth's face coming closer and closer as the trail sped under him. Oddly enough, it was the old Ruth, the one he had known in Texas that he saw. Back of her the old Jim hovered, handsome, scatter-brained, good-natured, entertaining and weak. His hand caressed his gun, and he only wished he could step back through time a couple of years and cut Jim down while he was like that. It would hurt him more, and—

He heard it coming, but it screamed past him before he could do anything—a rifle slug fired from a long way off. The boom of the gun came belatedly. He leaned over the horse, swung it off the trail and used his spurs. The next slug came closer, scaring the horse, and he let it take the bit and run.

Shadows came out to meet him on horse-

back, three of them, fanning out from a treeless swale to cut him off no matter which way he turned. He picked an upward course, to get high ground under him so he could be heading down when it got tight, and headed just to the left of the center horseman. It looked like Dill Merchison, and it was a slow horse.

He reached the top of the elevation and swung sharply to the right, and Pat Shepherd's voice floated out to him from far left: "Du-u-u-u-ugan-n-n-n!" He saw Dill stop his horse and drop to the ground, and a moment later another rifle slug nipped at him. Old Clem Merchison was on the right, and his horse was slow, and Dugan made out its clumsy movements in time. He swung toward it, trusting there would be only one rifle in the family, and he heard old Clem's angry bellow, and two useless reports from a revolver.

He was through them now, and the blot of Jim's grove stood out clearly, but Pat had one of Bob Munch's good horses and was quirting mercilessly along behind. He saw a shadow move away from the house and into the deeper shadows of the trees, and recognized Lee Crawford, the blacksmith. He headed for the trees, veered suddenly to the left, and hammered around the other side of the house. Crawford's .44 cracked once, and a woman screamed inside the house. Dugan recognized the voice. That would be Mrs. Crawford.

He threw himself down, hit a tree hard and stopped himself on it while his horse thundered on. Crawford yelled a warning to the woman, giving himself and his position away. He might be a good blacksmith but he was out of place in this business. Dugan moved toward him swiftly and caught him just as Pat Shepherd dropped off his horse in front of the house.

"He's in the grove somewhere!" Pat yelled, and at that moment Dugan stepped out and put his gun against the blacksmith's broad back and said, "Just stay right where you are and drop the gun, mister!"

Pat yelled again. Instinctively, Crawford raised his hands and dropped the gun, and immediately threw himself backwards as he got over being startled. He yelled, "Take him, Pat!" and Pat fired once, but he lacked the nerve to shoot as close to Crawford as the blacksmith was willing. Dugan let himself go backward into the darker shadows and snapped a shot at Pat and drew a howl of pain.

Pat's gun slipped out of his hand and he clutched at his upper arm, gritting his teeth and crouching. Dugan came up on springy feet and scooped up the blacksmith's .44 as he ran. Crawford came after him, rumbling oaths. Dugan hit Pat with his shoulder just as Pat got his left hand on the gun. The weapon dropped again, and Dugan put his foot on it and turned around in time to get his gun in Crawford's belly. The blacksmith had nerve, but he could not stand that touch a second time, not while he could look down and see the gun. He backed away and raised his hands, and Dugan stepped back where he could cover both of them, kicking Pat's gun along with him.

RUTH came out of the house then, walking toward them swiftly, and Dugan said, "How bad did I get you, son?" Pat swore at him and gripped his arm tighter to stop the bleeding, and when Ruth was close to them he stopped swearing and said, over and over again, "The murderin' skunk, the murderin' skunk, the murderin' skunk . . ."

"My way would have been better, Ruth," Dugan said to her. "Why didn't you let me alone?"

She came close to him, but not close enough to touch him. She was haggard with fear and worry, but she was a lot like the old Ruth for some queer reason. His treacherous throat betrayed him a moment.

"What did you come here for, Duge?" she whimpered. "You can't do any more to me." He cocked his head and tried to figure out what she meant. Crawford started toward him, and he flipped his wrist around and stopped him.

Ruth searched for words. "Did you want to rub it in? I—I knew you could kill him, but I never thought you'd come around and—"

Her knees buckled. She slumped down and pitched toward him. Pat forgot his arm and Crawford forgot Dugan's gun and they came snarling to catch her, but she fell against him. He dropped the guns and for a moment she was on his chest, with her face against his neck and her hair against his mouth. He went sick and trembling

and let Crawford take her, and muttered, "Let him have her, Pat. You're no good with one arm. How bad did I get you."

Crawford ran to the house yelling, "Cissie! Cissie!"

Pat struck at Dugan with his left arm, but the effort was too much for him. He spun on one foot. His face turned white and he clutched again at his arm, and Dugan caught him and eased him down to the ground. Pat was unconscious for a moment, and Dugan found the wound. His bullet had torn away a fistful of flesh on the inside of the arm, cutting an artery and exposing the bone. Dugan twisted his yellow scarf around the arm and wound it up with the barrel of Crawford's gun, and in a moment Pat opened his eyes.

"Where's Jim?" Dugan said, and Pat closed his eyes and then opened them quickly. He tried to sit up, but Dugan held him down. "Where's Jim?" he snarled. Pat lay back and blinked at him. Dugan had seen the same look of hate in the eyes of a trapped lobo.

"He went after you," Pat said. "You didn't get him!"

"No. He came after me?"

Pat got up slowly, gritting his teeth, muttering, "Have to tell Ruth. You wouldn't tell me no lies, would you, Dugan? You never seen him?"

Dugan said, "Hell, no, I never saw him, Pat! Did the fool actually start out after me?" Pat started to fall again, and Dugan caught him and half dragged him toward the house. The two Merchisons rode in on old Clem's horse, and Dill jumped down and ran at Dugan and almost knocked him down, driving the rifle muzzle into his back. Dugan turned around and said, "Get that cannon out of my back or I'll cave your head in with it."

Pat gagged, "Don't, Dill, you danged fool," and passed out again.

The baby began crying as they came through the door. The Merchisons took Pat there, and Dugan stepped back and tried to roll a cigarette, but his hands trembled and he spoiled two of them. He was shaking tobacco into and over the third one when Ruth came out. She had the baby in her arms, and she ran the few steps between them.

"You didn't see him, Duge?" she said shrilly. "Didn't you see him at all? Oh, Duge, tell me the truth, for God's sake!"

He said, "No, Ruth. I swear I never saw the fool." He got his hands steadied and twisted the cigarette shut and put it in his mouth. Dill Merchison, Lee and Cissy Crawford came to the door and stood there, sullen and watchful. He caught Ruth's eye again and her look pulled the words out of him: "Ruth, you got to believe me, I sure never did see him."

She made a queer noise in her throat. He struck his match and saw the baby for the first time, and he forgot his cigarette and let the flame burn down to his thumb.

He had wondered what Ruth looked like when she was a baby, as has every man, and he wondered what her baby would look like. It would resemble her, of course. Only this one didn't. It was about six months old now, and it was Jim Bell all over again. It had his curly, dark hair, his dark, lustrous, sparkling eyes, his high cheek-bones, narrow, distinguished-looking face. It was so much like Jim on the outside that it *had* to be like him inside, and he felt sorrier for it than he had ever felt in his life.

Without thinking how Ruth would feel about it, he reached out and caught the baby's fist and said, "Why, you poor little tyke, what a job of work you've got ahead of you."

Ruth snatched the baby away. "Keep your hands to yourself!"

His curiosity was too great, and he had to say, "What do you call him—Jim, too?"

"It's a her," Ruth said.

He lit another match, thinking, Well, maybe with a girl it won't be so bad. Anyway it's part Ruth.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Hole Card

HE WAS half way to his horse before he got his wits back. He heard Clem Merchison say contemptuously, "Let him go! In fac', *make* him go. Drap a piece of lead behind him if he slows down."

He swung up on his horse, saying, "Don't try that, friend. It's been a full evening, and I'm throwin' away IOU's for two years."

Dill's face showed how much he would like to shoot, and he kept the big muzzle

trained on Dugan as he rode his horse close to the door.

Dugan started to say something, to tell Ruth, if possible, that he was heading south while still feeling he had been right. The Merchisons' horse whickered, and they heard hoofs coming toward them.

"My horse," Dill said. "He run off when I got off to f'ar."

"No, there's two of them," his father said, pushing out quickly with his hand on his gun.

Dill kept the rifle on Dugan while his father covered the approach from the shadows. The two came in fast, and one shouted, "Halloo-o-o-o, you there!"

Clem holstered the gun and ran out into the path. "Munch! Now what the devil!"

Munch swung down, panting, "I wondered if you'd let me in without a shot."

Merchison said, "Bob, you know we wouldn't f'ar at you." Then he swung around with an exclamation as the other man dismounted, and his gun came out. "What're you bringin' Double Diamonders here for, Bob?" he growled.

It was Cap Duncan, and he was on a Double Diamond horse.

"I pick my own sides," Cap said. "I never fit with nesters before. Always been against 'em. This'll be a right smart change." He recognized Dugan then. "Well I'm—pardon me, ladies. There's a man I've wanted to see. How does right now suit you, Texas? Let's see you do me like you did Slim."

Munch said, "Shut up, Cap! I brung you here and I'm accountable for you, now. Shut your mouth." Cap shut up, and Munch turned to the men in the doorway. "Did one of your people go gunning over to Boyce's place tonight? Cap understood so. Tell them about it."

Cap told how Boyce had come out to get them out for some nighthawk job or other, only Cap made up his mind he didn't want any more Double Diamond. He didn't tell Boyce—he just walked out and saddled a horse and headed for town, planning to leave the horse there and catch a train out. He was leaving the yard, he said, when somebody yelled, "Nester! Nester! Well, if that ain't nerve—he comes right in here!" There was a scuffle in front of the house, Cap said, and he gave his horse the spurs—a nester more or less didn't matter to him at the time. Don't matter a damn bit.

Then he thought he'd go by way of Bob's, and leave Boyce's horse there and borrow one of Bob's, and for some reason Bob wanted to take the nester's side. "So I says deal me in too, Bob. I'll try anything once," Cap finished.

They looked at one another, frowning. Dugan had known all along what had happened, but he could not bring himself to say it. Ruth understood first, and she screamed, "Jim! They've got Jim!" The bed creaked inside and Pat stumbled to the door. The look on his face was awful. He said Ruth's name, but she did not hear him.

Dugan flinched and whispered, "Why, Pat, you poor devil, you unhappy, unlucky son-of-a-gun! You love her too! You did all along!" He stood up in his stirrups and cursed himself: the difference was that Pat had loved her more than either of them. "You wanted her to be happy more than you wanted to have her," Dugan whispered. "You son-of-a-gun, if you'd said so—why, maybe—"

He kicked Dill's rifle barrel to one side and said, "I told you not to point that thing at me. Now, shut up and listen. That sneakin' horse-trainer—the one you call the professor—somehow he got wind that you was standin' guard here against me. He was over to the Double Diamond and told Boyce about it tonight. They were goin' to follow me here. I plumb forgot!" They grumbled their disbelief, and he raved at them. "Shut up! This could be pretty bad. Now what'll they do—what'll that ivory-headed cattle baron do? He's got Jim. He might take him to town and holler he's caught himself an outlaw nester, but he won't. One ain't enough. He'll come toward Sugar Crick, I think. We might leave a—no, Pat's got one arm. He'll have to do for here. The rest of us, we'll light out for town."

Crawford swore at him, but Duncan yelled, "That makes sense! Boyce is that kind of a Boyce." He reached over and caught Dugan by the ankle. "You'd better not pull a double-cross, Texas! You better stay right with the Lord."

Dugan caught Pat's eye. "Kind of keep an eye on this here outfit, Pat. I reckon maybe I'll meet up with Jim after all. *Get out of my way!*"

HE RAMMED his spurs in and raked them fore and aft, and the horse shot through them. He did not hear them scatter for their own horses. He did not bother to stop and plan with them. He did not care what they did.

"Pat gave him to her, and now I'm going to give him back," he said. He felt a little light-headed and gay, and he whistled nervously between his teeth. "He ain't much, but it's what she wants, and by golly that girl can have anything she wants. Ain't that right, horse?" He looked back just once, and saw them fanned out a half-mile behind.

"Riding like fools," he chuckled. "Here we go with a bunch of nesters. My daddy would turn over in his grave, wouldn't he, horse?" Ruth's face floated clearly in his mind now, and it was the real Ruth, the present one, and he liked her better this way. "She knowed what she wanted, and she's stickin' it out. Now you can't expect no more of this world than to get what you want, can you, horse?" he said. "When you come right down to it, people don't often get what they want. Maybe that Jim's been pretty good to her after all. What do you think, horse?"

They stumbled and went down in four feet of water, from taking the creek too fast, but he had his gun out and over his head before they went over. He threw his leg up and let the horse rise under him, and they splashed across and reached the main Sugar Creek road and swung around a bend. The square little store building came in sight, and then Crawford's blacksmithy and the two houses.

He thundered through the town, trusting his instinct, which told him Boyce's outfit would not be lurking in ambush. They were not in sight in the town. Therefore they had to be down on one or the other of the farms. Boyce, of course, would overlook Jim Bell's—or Ring's—isolated claim. He had Sugar Creek on his mind, and there was room for no more.

He saw their horses at a low-built shanty, half log and half soddy. There were seven horses, with one rider watching them. He yelled and dropped to the ground and ran like a rabbit when he saw Dugan, and Dugan rode him down and leaned out of the saddle and dropped on top of him. They rolled a dozen feet, and the Double Diamond man lay limp when Dugan got up. It was Slim, and he would live to regret letting Boyce browbeat him into this trip. One leg was twisted queerly; Slim would walk with a limp the rest of his life, because he lacked the guts to stand up to Boyce.

Another Double Diamond man came to the door and stood there a second, framed in yellow lamplight. Dugan drove in from the darkness and hit him with his shoulder and knocked him back into the room and came in with his gun leveled.

Boyce looked up and said impatiently, "There you are. Where the devil have you been, Smith? If I can't depend on you—"

Jim had aged—God, how he had aged! His looks were gone. His curls were still there, but there was gray in them, and he had not given them much attention lately. He was thin, and he looked harder than he ever had, and the happy-go-lucky lilt was gone from his mouth. It was turned down bitterly at the corners, but it made him more of a man.

He had come in for rough treatment from Boyce's men. One eye was closed, and his cheek was cut, and he had two scalp wounds.

Dugan said, "Hi, Jim. They passed you around among 'em tonight, didn't they? Well, that's what yella-bellies think is fun." Some of the Double Diamond cowboys who had crowded into the room understood now that he was not on their side; but not Boyce! Dugan grinned at Boyce's broad back, and his look dared any of Boyce's men to take a hand in it.

Boyce took Jim by the arm, while another Double Diamond man held his other one, and turned him around to face the old mountaineer woman who was glaring at them from the corner.

"Which one is this one? Where does he belong? Look here, old lady, it's going to go hard with you if you don't give me some help. I'm fed up with you Merchisons anyway. Which claim does this nester belong to?"

Mrs. Merchison spat tobacco juice at him and said, "Go to hell!"

Boyce squared around to face Jim and slapped him hard. "Where do you live, nester? We'll see how you like to have your place overrun," he yelled.

He started to slap Jim again. Dugan

shoved the gun into his holster. He jumped across the room and hit Boyce from behind, and it was like hitting a 'dobe wall. Boyce stumbled and shouted but he kept his feet under him. Dugan got a look at his face then; the big man was livid with rage. He reached for his gun, and Dugan yelled, "No you don't!" and came up under the powerful arm and swung it upward.

A DOUBLE DIAMOND man at the door yelled, "Here they come!" He vanished into the darkness, and the others streamed after him. A shot sounded, and then another, and a man screamed in pain. Dugan stepped back a little from Boyce and rubbed his chin with his left hand and said, "Well, are you going to try for that gun now?"

Mrs. Merchison darted for the door, and Dugan pushed Jim out of the way and grinned at Boyce again.

Boyce had been a big man too long, and he could not quickly get over being a big man. He strode to the door and shouted, "Jerry! Pete!" It seemed to occur to him then that Jerry and Pete were not going to jump at this yell. He went out into the darkness, and Dugan heard Bob Munch call, almost apologetically, "Neal, let's don't have any more trouble now. Get your hands up where I can—*Ahh!*"

Dugan heard Boyce's shot, and Duncan's yell. He pushed Jim down on the bed and said, "You're in no shape for this. Lay down and stay out of range." He ran for the door, stooping to blow out the lamp, and as he reached the outside in one last, reckless leap, someone shot into the wall beside him.

He hit the ground and rolled over and lay listening a moment, thinking, You never can tell what a coward will do. He could have talked us out of this, if he hadn't shot Bob. That won't set good with the cattlemen. He raised himself a little and called out, "Cap! How bad is he hurt?"

Cap cursed. "He got him right in the face. How're we going to tell Mrs. Munch?"

Dugan could tell where his own allies were from the angry growls that went up. The Double Diamond men had scattered back toward Merchison's tiny sod barn, behind which grew his squaw corn. Some of the corn had been cut and shocked; he could hear their horses tearing at the shocks. The smart Double Diamond men would try to catch themselves a horse about now. . . .

He stood up and said, "I'm going to handle this."

Cap said, "Oh no, oh no, oh no!"

Dugan heard him crashing around in the brush, blind with rage. Yes, there had been one Double Diamond man with a sound core, but he was too hot for this job.

Dugan shouted stridently, "Stay out of my way, Cap! This is the way we do it in Texas. Boyce, this is Dugan Smith. I'm coming after you. You can come out with your hands up if you want to, but you better do it quick." Cap became silent, and Dugan knew he would have to keep him silent. He laughed, more for Cap's benefit than Boyce's, and said, "You're a coward and a poor shot, Boyce. I'll spot you the first shot and then kill you." It worked. Cap said "Lord! Lord!" and Dugan heard him squat down.

The only other sound then was Jim's uncertain, dazed footsteps in the dark house. He would find the door and come out in a minute, and Boyce, being a coward, would shoot at the first thing that moved. I promised I'd bring him back to you, Ruth, and that's what I'm going to do, skimmed through Dugan's mind in a blur, and he ambled out away from the house with the gun in his hand.

Jim ran into some furniture near the door and swore; he was getting his wits back and yearning to join the fun. Still Boyce did not move or speak. Dugan dropped his gun into its holster as noisily as he could.

"There it goes, back into leather, Boyce," he said. "You better do something quick, Boyce. All right, then—here I come."

He started walking toward the squat sod barn. A pig squealed back there, and Dugan began whistling between his teeth and scraping his feet, and Cap burst out, "You damned Texas fool, come back here!" Dugan heard the pig hit the fence and run the other way, grunting, and he hoped it was Boyce in the pig pen.

The thing he feared most of all came then—a wild, wavering whoop: "Hey you Pecos!" It had been their battle-cry when

he and Pat and Jim had been the best-known saloon-wreckers in Texas. It was Jim, beginning to enjoy his hurts and yearning to get into the first wild fun he had had in two years. Dugan began trotting toward the pig pen, and he heard a crash as either the pig or the man broke through.

He reached corn stubble that threatened his footing, and slowed down. "Hey you, Pecos!" rang again, with something like Jim's old reckless gaiety; and then again, and again, each time closer. Jim had always had an instinct for trouble; he could follow it no matter how soft-footed, until his capture of Ruth robbed him of his irresponsibility.

Dugan thought he saw a quivering motion of the silhouette of the first corn-shock and he said conversationally, "I can fire right through that thing, Boyce. Are you plumb loco or just scared? You damned coward!"

Boyce came out with a bellow that was both anger and terror. For that one split second, he persuaded himself he was the one and only Neal Boyce, the great man, the lawyer-rancher-king of the Niobrara. It was enough to get him out, and make him pull the trigger.

FLAME licked out at Dugan and his hand sloped down easily and hit the .44 and it jumped upward against the heel of his palm and he gave the hair-trigger the lightest of touches, leaning back slightly, half turned sideways, with his feet wide apart. The recoil drove his arm back like a spring, and the gun stayed level and held its target. As he squeezed the trigger the second time he said, "Why—why—I'm hit! I—I let him kill me! That was a fool stunt!" He felt the blackness closing in, throbbing and pounding and pulsing and roaring, and he saw Boyce pitch forward with a bubbling, whining sound. The ground came up to meet him slowly, and as a cut-off corn stub grazed his scalp he thought . . . This hurts worse than Boyce's slug. Nester corn! Well, Ruth, there . . . he . . . is. . . .

He lay there a moment with the darkness coming and going, and when they got to him, and Mrs. Merchison began poking at the hole in his side, he was glad no one had heard him say he thought he was killed.

Jim knelt down beside him and squeezed his arm and said, "Dugan, if you—Dugan, you don't know how—if you haul off and die now, Dugan, you dirty old—" The rest of it was the language of saloons.

Dugan whispered, "That's a mighty fine little heifer kid you got, Jim. With a kid like that, you'll probably be a man of substance some day. What's her name?"

Jim said, "You may think this is silly, but there ain't any Mexicans around here and nobody but us knows what it means. We named her Cielito Lindo—Cielito Lindo Bell."

"Sing it, Jim," Dugan said, "if you still can." And Jim turned his face up and cut loose with the same old golden notes:

*"Ay, ay, ay, ay!*
*Canta y no llores,*
*Por que cantado. . . ."*

"I cain't see nothin' to music where you cain't understand the words," Dill Merchison grumbled. "Dang furrin stuff!"

THE END

**"THE HUNTED" by Frank Bonham**

Sheriff King's hard face grew pale as he looked through the gap leading to dreaded Wild Horse Valley. King wasn't a religious man but somehow he thought he'd feel better if there were only a priest to precede him and purify the trail leading into that ghastly vale of the tortured and the damned. . . .

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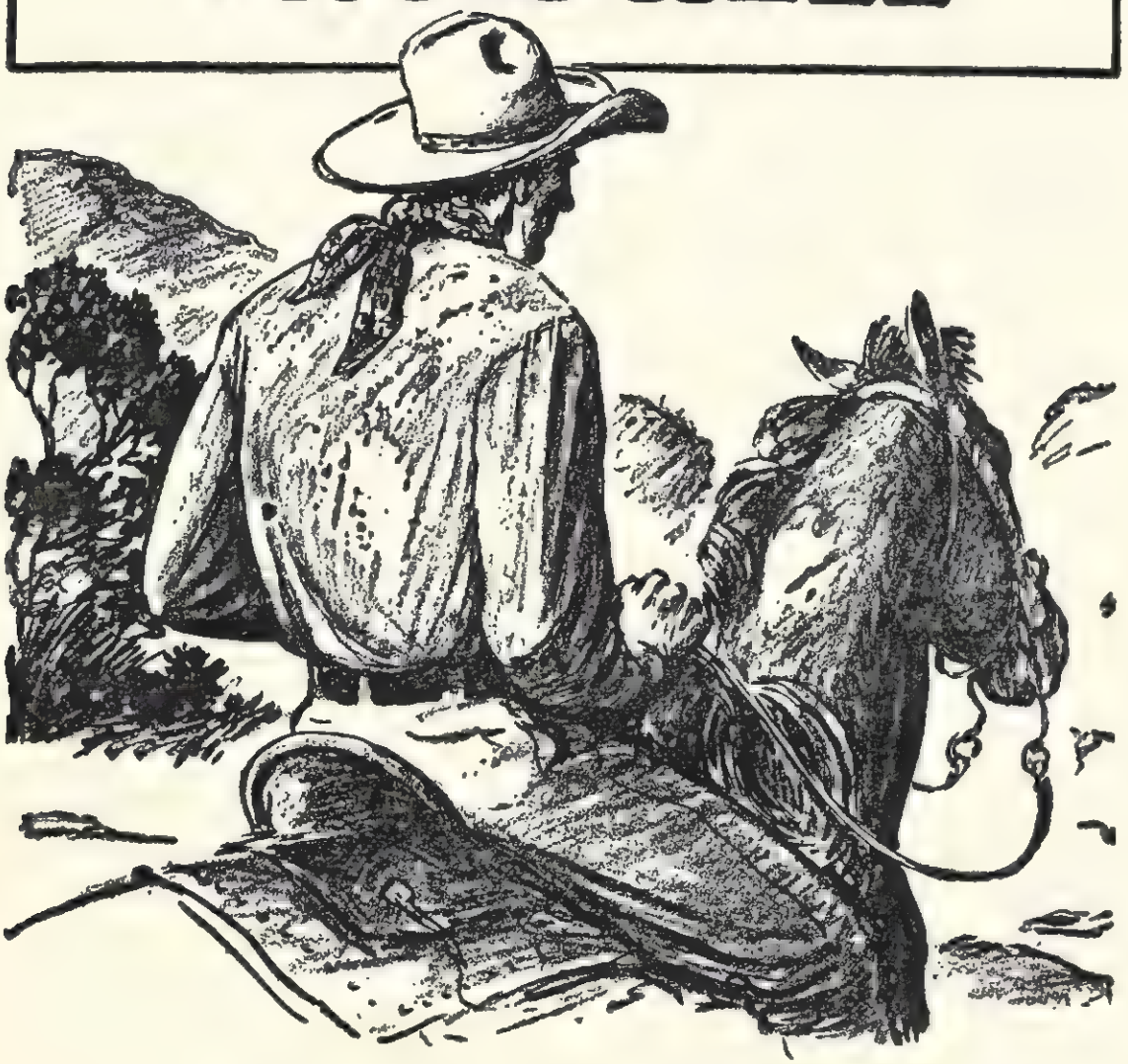
# THE PADRE FROM HELL



"I was told you fell in the river and got drowned!" gasped Hutch

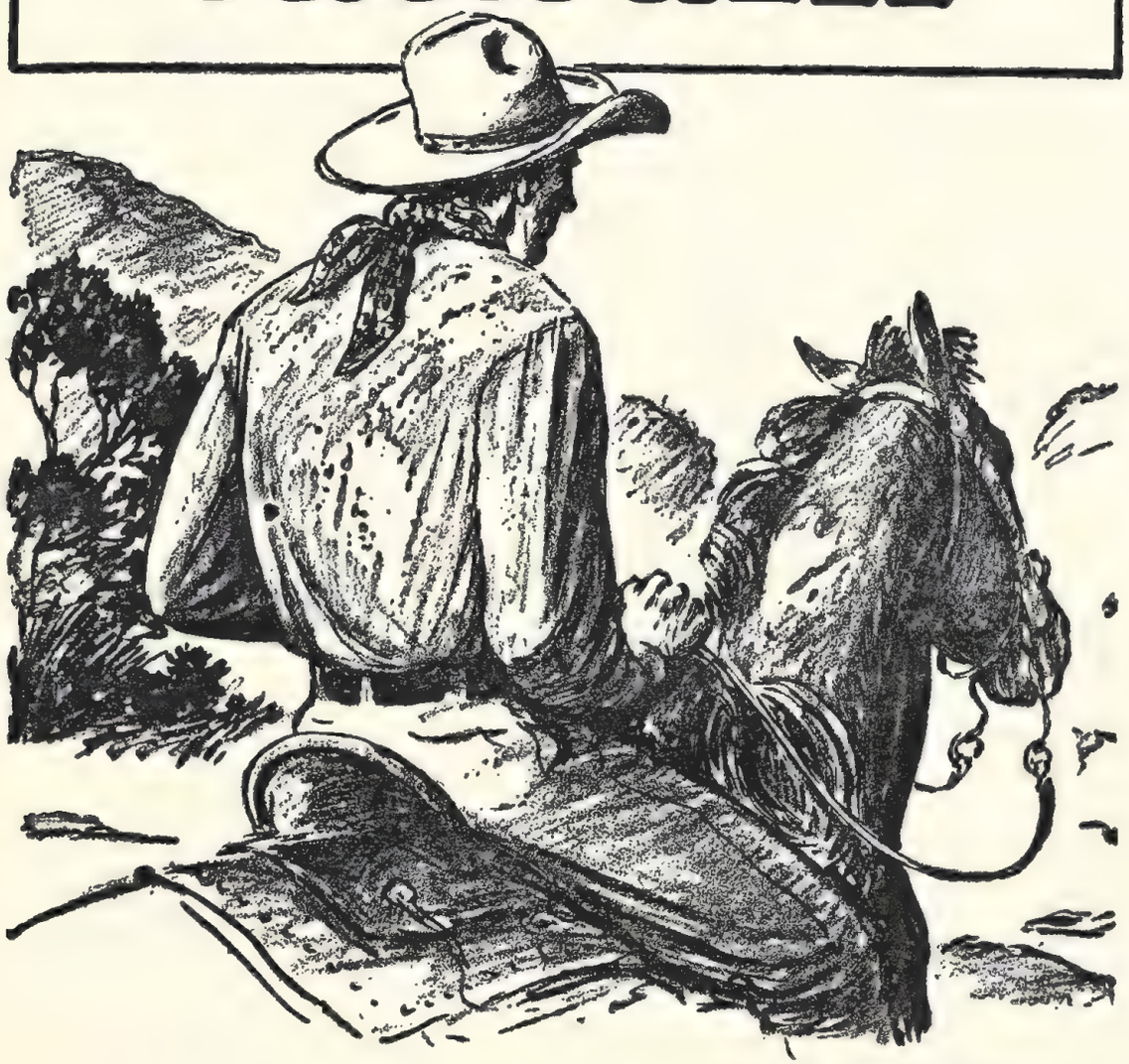
**By Marvin De Vries**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Make-Believe Padre

BROCK WILLOW didn't put much stock in *chisos,* or ghost stories, until one of them came along and hit him in the face. Even then he tried to

# THE PADRE FROM HELL



"I was told you fell in the river and got drowned!" gasped Hutch

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**Don Brock Willow finally figured out the ghastly riddle of bewitched Canyon del Hombre Perdido because, fighting on his side, were a broken neck, two jaspers who wouldn't stay dead, and a horseman a sixgun couldn't kill—at a range of two little, lousy yards!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Make-Believe Padre

BROCK WILLOW didn't put much stock in *chisos,* or ghost stories, until one of them came along and hit him in the face. Even then he tried to figure it out in a practical way, and drew a lot of practical lead slugs in his direction for his trouble.

This was Big Bend country, reeking with phantoms, with Spanish treasure trove under every stone, and the spook of a conquistador behind every bush. He could go across the river to Señora Dubose's cantina and hear tales of this country by the hundreds, tales of lost mines and stolen plunder. The Spaniards, it seemed, buried their loot as soon as they took it, and neither they nor anyone else could ever find it.

These tales were told by wretched

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*pilados,* or slicked-up vaqueros with far-off looks in their eyes. Tales that Bonnie, Señora Dubose's daughter, told, with a half-mischievous, half-believing look in her dark eyes—tales of stalking ghosts and places bewitched: *embrujada,* señor, like the water-hole in your own Canyon del Hombre Perdido. That was a tale he heard more than once from a padre, who came riding his liver-and-white mule, and stopped to pass the time of day, and admire Brock's canyon. But he was amazed to hear that Brock watered his stock at the bewitched *tinaja.* Didn't he know that Cabeza de Vaca's soldiers had drunk of that water and died in their tracks there on the ground around the pool?

Brock smiled, and kept on watering his stock. He built himself a stout place to live. He bought a fine stallion from Don Salamón across the river and raised horses on the good graze, selling them to the Didd brothers, Newt and Jube, who, he understood, drove them clear up to Missouri where they could be re-sold at a good profit. For help, he had two Negroes, Willie and Friend, who claimed to be freemen, although he suspected otherwise. No, he put no stock in the loose talk about the bewitched *tinaja,* even though it came from a padre of the church, until one night the ghosts came again, secretly, unheard, and once again touched the water with their unclean hands, and left behind them the sorry ruin of what it had taken Brock Willow five years of sweat and toil to build.

He came outside that morning to see a black cloud of buzzards in the sky, hanging over the canyon as though tied on strings to the stars. New arrivals wheeled in from the wild fastnesses, and took their places like soldiers back from leave. Occasionally, clusters broke away, and dropped like stones. Brock's glance settled on the water-hole, and a puzzled frown grew between his eyes. Usually, at this time, a herd of horses stood around it, watering, but now the place was deserted. There wasn't an animal to be seen anywhere in the canyon.

He called Willie and Friend, who occupied the beginnings of a bunkhouse, but couldn't locate them. Then, a knot of alarm growing in his belly, he roped a horse and rode out to see what had happened. An hour later he returned, found some extra ammunition and rode out again. The last tally he had made had run up to more than five hundred head of fine animals. Now, all except possibly a hundred were stone dead, and the rest dying in slow agony, parched tongues hanging out between drawn-back lips, bodies hot with fever, eyes aflame with panic.

GRIM-LIPPED, steeled for the slaughter, Brock rode among them, killing what remained alive, scattering buzzards as he went, emptying his gun in sudden venom at a lobo wolf that stalked across his path, finishing what the *chisos* had begun in the dead of night.

The rocky ground around the water-hole was crowded with dead animals, and the buzzards were thickest here. Sick to death, angry, bewildered, muttering profanely, Brock walked around the pool, remembering the padre's story of the bewitched water. In sheer defiance, he cupped some into his two hands and drank it down. Then, defying all the spooks in kingdom come, he filled his canteen, and drank of the water from time to time as he moved on about his grisly chore.

By noon it was done, and he returned to his thick-walled cabin, ammunition gone, eyes blood-shot. He had a store of *tequila* he had bought at Señora Dubose's cantina, and poured himself a stiff drink, but it didn't ease the tight knot in his stomach. Wilie and Friend had surely run off, and he cursed them roundly, wondering what had spooked them, and where they had gone. He still put no stock in witchery, but something must have happened during the night that had scared them off. Unless, possibly, they were responsible for the treachery, although, until now, he had been completely convinced of their loyalty.

It had happened at a bad time for him, too. He had been expecting the Didd boys, and he would have had some cash if they had shown up a little earlier, instead of a buzzard's feast. Now he had nothing, not even a decent stock of supplies to keep him going. But it could have been worse still. He had bought some more prize stock from Don Salamon, paying the last cash he had for it, and Don Salomon's vaqueros were driving the herd up from below the Border right now. If they had already made delivery the loss would have been still worse, but it was bad enough as it was. He seldom

drank, but this time, as the full scope of what had happened struck him, he went after the fiery liquor with the stubborn determination to drink himself numb.

By mid-afternoon he had practically succeeded. A buzzard had the sheer gall to light on the window ledge, and look in, and he shot it dead through the bars. It surprised him that he hit it, but he did. A little later he heard a hail outside, and went to the door. After he got his eyes focused against the bright shine, he recognized his visitor.

It was the padre who rode the liver-and-white saddle mule, and had first warned him against the bewitched *tinaja*. The padre had quite a saintly look. He made pious gestures. He carried his head humbly. But Brock had a notion he had carefully cultivated these mannerisms. At any rate, when he got inside, he abandoned them, and took after the *tequila*. He had keen eyes and a fat brown face, and wore his cassock like a bathrobe, without dignity or poise. He called himself Benito—El padre Benito.

"I WILL not say I warned you," he stated, holding up both hands to express the horror of what he had seen. "I will only say I am sorry it had to happen."

"It didn't have to happen, did it?" Brock muttered.

The padre shrugged. "Who is there among us to say what must, or must not, happen?"

"At any rate, I'm cooked, padre," Brock admitted. "I can't begin again. I had some cash the first time I started. All I got now is that jug of *tequila*, so help yourself. When that's gone I'll be right down to the ground."

"What a misfortune!"

"What kind of poison do you s'pose that is?"

The padre raised his finger and shook it reprovingly. "Witchery, my son, witchery."

"Don't give me that stuff."

Padre Benito looked shocked. "You still do not believe such things?"

"I tell you that water's okay. I've been drinking it all day. You're using it right now for your chasers."

*"Por Dios!"* the padre breathed, and pushed the water away with a visible shudder. "Possibly, though, the *tequila* takes off the curse."

"I noticed something out there when I was riding around, padre," Brock went on. "All the horses were facing the water-hole, every last one of them. It was that way all over the place. It looked as if they were trying to get to water, not away from it. I got a hunch they were poisoned some other place."

"And who," the padre asked, shocked again, "would do such a thing?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out, you can depend on that."

"Possibly, bandidos."

"I've killed three bandidos who tried to run off with my stock since I've been here. They leave me alone."

*"Si,* I have heard. But it could be El Terremoto—the Earthquake. He is a big bandido. What has happened to others would not frighten him."

"What would he want to do a thing like that for? What good would it do him?"

The padre shrugged helplessly, and took another drink, this time skipping the chaser.

"I can't believe it," Brock continued, "but maybe I got to blame my two men, Willie and Friend. I wouldn't let them go across the river to the cantina yesterday because I thought the water was too high. They crabbed to beat the band, but I had no idea they were really mad."

"I have heard," the padre remarked, "that they are not free men. You didn't by any chance threaten to turn them over to the *empleados?"*

"Hell, no, I wouldn't do that."

"Of course not, but they might have been frightened. We say so many things in the heat of anger."

"Well, maybe I did say something when I was mad at 'em. But I didn't mean it—they ought to know that."

"They might have taken it seriously?"

"Well, they might have."

"That explains it then."

"Explains what, padre?"

"I saw them along the river. They were both armed. It looked like an ambush, and I questioned them, but they gave me evasive answers. They were watching the trail from this way, and I suspect they were waiting there to kill you."

"They wouldn't kill me." Brock got to his feet. "I'm going down there, padre. I've got to talk to them."

"I wouldn't risk it, my son," the padre

warned. "Your talk probably frightened them. If they see you coming down the trail, they will suspect you mean to carry out your threats."

"I've got to talk to them. I want to know if they heard or saw anything suspicious last night."

"They probably won't let you near them. They will either run, or shoot, when they see you."

"Maybe you're right," Brock admitted finally, "but I've got to see them some way."

"I'll tell you a way," the padre suggested. "Ride my mule, and you will be right on them before they recognize you."

Brock shook his head. "It wouldn't work, padre. They—"

"Ride my mule, and put on my cassock, and look gentle, my son. Sure it will work."

It took Brock quite a while to agree, but he finally did, because he wanted to reassure them that he meant no harm. "All right, padre," he said "your mule, and your cassock—and your gentle look, if you please."

RIDING a mule made Brock feel silly, and the padre's robe was hot and bothersome. Before he got halfway to the river his head cleared a little and he wished he had handled it all his own way. He didn't think Willie and Friend had the nerve to bushwhack him, even if they wanted to. But it was true they might run off, and he wanted to talk to them. Possibly, they knew something of what had happened and could help him get to the bottom of it.

The river was swift and muddy, the bank steep and high. Brock headed for the ford down-stream where three trails—Las Veredas Coloradas—came together and pitched headlong off the bluff. It was much used by law-shy gentry, heading for the Ladrones, because Mexican rurales or Texas rangers seldom came this way, although, under the rule of hot pursuit, both had free leave on either side.

On the far side of the ford stood Señora Dubose's cantina, and Brock figured he would go on and talk with Bonnie, Señora Dubose's daughter, even though he wore the padre's rig. It would do him good to talk to Bonnie because she had a way of making even the wrongest things right. She could probably even tell him what to do, where to take hold of something and pull himself together again. As far as he was concerned, she was an angel set down in the very back yard of hell, and, for him, it would always be so.

The river set up a wild roar in his ears. He looked over the edge of the bluff and watched it twist like syrup coming to a boil. He crossed a wide meadow where he had considered settling when he first came to the country, but had given up the idea because it was too close to the crossing. He figured he'd be bothered by too many wild characters on their mysterious comings and goings. He had had enough of them as it was, rustlers trying to hold wet stock in his canyon until the hue and cry died down, horse thieves trying to run off his animals and roving bands of bandidos—probably El Terremoto's own—preying on honest men wherever they happened to meet.

He watched both sides of the trail for Willie and Friend, and settled in his mind what he would say to them if they showed themselves. He heard a horse whinny in a willow motte that lay ahead, but, as far as he knew, the two hired hands were afoot. He thought he saw a sudden movement along the motte's edge, but he wasn't sure. It might be only the play of light on the green shimmer. He kept on moving, concealing his face as best he could. But when he got within point-blank range a gun roared and flame laced out of the greenery. The mule made a wild flurry and went down with a bullet through its neck. Brock flattened out behind it. The animal wasn't dead. It threshed and struggled violently, and Brock had to keep out of reach of its shod hoofs, but he stayed where he was until the man who had fired came out of the brush.

It was a uniformed rurale. Two others followed close on his heels. They threw a half-circle around him and closed in, wary as wolves. After a brief interval two more men followed, and Brock recognized them. They were the Didd boys, Newt and Jube. Brock let out a sigh of relief, and yelled to them to call off their fireworks. "I'm Brock Willow, Newt. You know me."

"Show yourself," Newt called back.

Brock got to his feet. A rurale leveled his rifle but held his fire. Brock waited

for recognition. He had dealt with the Didd boys enough, so that both of them would recognize him. Or if they didn't his disguise as a padre of the church should be be enough to save him. But it didn't. The two brothers spoke to each other briefly, then Newt called to the nearest rurale, "Shoot, you fool. That's the man you're lookin' for—El Terremoto. Shoot!"

Brock lunged sideways. The rurale's rifle spurted gun-flame. Probably the *tequila* Brock had soaked up slowed him down. At least the bullet touched him; he thought it took off the top of his head. It sent him reeling backward to the edge of the bluff. He tried to catch his balance, realizing his danger, but he couldn't stop himself. His feet left solid ground and he dropped to the water, just as another slug whined over him.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Killer Brothers

BROCK WILLOW had a soft spot in his heart for Bonnie Dubose. Sometimes he had the wild notion that she gave him a special place in her own, although it was true that everyone who came to the cantina sparked her, and she seemed to enjoy it all. The three rurales who had crossed the river that morning, hot on the trail of El Terremoto, returned, flushed with victory, and spent some time at the cantina putting on a big brag for her benefit.

"The big peeg is a dead duck," one of them announced. "I shot him through the head like a sitting pigeon, and now he is a fish swimming in the water."

"Ah, El Terremoto dies, and turns into a variety of animals," Bonnie answered, her dark eyes sparkling mischievously. "You are sure he is a gone goose?"

"But of course. With my own eyes I see him catapult off the bluff."

"Strange things have gone into that river and come out again," Bonnie observed.

"But not El Terremoto," the rurale stated confidently. "He is a drowned rat."

Bonnie loved news, and heard most of it for miles around. If a man fell off his horse a hundred miles away, she heard about it. If a dog gave birth to a litter of pups anywhere in the district she knew about it before the mother was able to be around again. Deep down in her heart, though, she was a treasure-hunter, and news about lost treasure excited her most. She knew the location of all the best treasures and the names of the ghostly wardens who guarded them. She owned a map that showed where the Lost Swede Mine of the Ladrones was. She knew where Spanish gold was buried. She could walk only a short distance from the doorway of the cantina, and stand on a certain spot, and say, "Dig here, amigos, and you will find a morral full of opals of the Orient. Dig there, and you will see the golden candlesticks that were stolen from the church. I have it all on a map."

But any kind of news would do, and she kept the rurales talking with her questions, and they told her it was now clear why they had never been able to catch El Terremoto before.

"He disguised himself as a padre of the church, and rode a mule—a liver-and-white mule. Think of that!"

"Such desecration," Bonnie exclaimed, "will surely land him in the bottom pit of hell."

"With our help," the rurale agreed smugly, "it has."

"How on earth did you hear of this disguise?"

"From the brothers Didd. Together we set a trap, and he rode into it on his white mule. It was wonderful."

Bonnie pried out every small detail and stowed it away in her mind. The rurales drank a large quantity of wine to celebrate the event, but moved on before nightfall. Señora Dubose said it was God's blessing that El Terremoto had at last been dispatched.

"They made a menagerie of him before sending him off," Bonnie remarked, savoring her small joke.

The señora smiled, then said thoughtfully, "There is something behind this sudden flurry over El Terremoto. It is important business when three rurales come to these parts all in one swoop. We have seen none for a year."

"Don Salamon is probably behind it. Maybe he stirred them up to clear the way for his horses."

"Yes?"

"He has sold some horses to Brock Wil-

low. I met a padre some time ago—Padre Benito, he called himself—who told me. He was riding a—" Suddenly she stopped and put her fist in her mouth, then gulped, and went on again, "It was El Terremoto himself I spoke to."

SEÑORA DUBOSE put her hand to her forehead. "My dear. I've told you a hundred times not to come anywhere near such bandidos."

"But—a padre!"

"Perhaps he was planning even then to steal Don Salamon's horses."

"I wonder why the Didd brothers concern themselves with such things. And how would they know he rode a white mule, and wore a padre's cassock any more than you or I?"

Señora Dubose shrugged. "No doubt it is their business to know such things so they can carry on their affairs."

"No doubt," Bonnie agreed. She heard a slight commotion outside and went to the door to look. It was still light enough to see a short distance, and what she saw again brought her fist to her mouth.

Within ten steps of the doorway a man lay face down on the ground. He looked for all the world as if he had been spewed up bodily out of the river and flung like driftwood onto their doorstep. It was Brock Willow. Somehow he had managed to get rid of the padre's cassock in the river and pull ashore at the ford of the Veredas Coloradas. He had gotten half way up the hill when he could go no more, and passed out. Bonnie recognized him as soon as she turned him over and got the sand and grit out of his face. She called her mother, and together they got him inside.

"He has a lump on his head as big as a hen's egg," Señora Dubose observed. "I wonder how he arrived at that?"

Brock started to come to, and heard it. "I'll tell you when I can catch my breath," he answered.

"Brandy, Bonnie—pronto."

Brock shook his head. "I'm loaded with the stuff. That's half my trouble."

"Unless I'm mistaken," Bonnie said, "it's starting to come out of the top of your head."

"No, I got shot there, by rurales."

"But no!"

"It's a fact—three of them. They jumped me along the river. Damn near killed me!"

Brock told them the whole sorry tale, from the time he had stepped outside that morning until he went over the bluff into the river. Of course they knew about the bewitched water-hole, and Bonnie said she had seen the buzzards in that direction during the day, but it was all shocking news.

"The reason the rurales fired at you was because they thought you were the Padre Benito, and the Padre Benito is the big bandido—El Terremoto. The rurales told me."

Brock let that sink in. It began to fit in with the series of events. "And how did the rurales find this out all of a sudden?" he asked.

"The Didd boys gave them the tip."

"Is that right?" He had dealt with the Didd boys, and they had treated him honestly. "I called out to them, and told them who I was. They either didn't hear, or didn't want to hear." He felt the knob on his head. "I don't have any idea how I got ashore. But I got rid of that robe, I remember that."

"You have lost everything?" Señora Dubose asked.

Brock nodded bitterly. "Even my self-respect. I didn't use any sense. Benito knew they were after him, and trapped me into this with his smooth talk. Hell, he's even got my clothes." He tried to sit up but sank back again with a disgusted groan.

"It will probably explode for some time to come," Bonnie said sympathetically. "But we will get some food into you and you will feel a little more reconciled."

Now that he knew who the padre was, Brock could figure this thing out part way, at least. But he couldn't get past a certain point. He couldn't say for sure whether the trap the padre had thrown him into, and the loss of his horses, were two separate incidents, or whether they tied in together somehow. He was quite sure Newt Didd had heard him call, just before the rurale fired. Was the horse dealer too late to stop it, or hadn't he wanted to? One thing that floored him completely was why anyone would want to poison his horses. Rustlers he could understand, but not this.

By the time Bonnie finished feeding him—he let her do it, although he could easily have managed by himself—he felt better. As he had guessed, half his misery he

could blame on the *tequila,* and he hoped it had done the same for Benito.

BEFORE deep dark another visitor showed up. It was Jube Didd, and he was more surprised to see Brock than Brock was to see him. That first surprised look gave Brock the notion the Didd boys knew exactly what they were doing right from the start, and that they had no more idea of trapping El Terremoto than that notorious bandit had of being caught in the trap. They were in this together, and Brock had to play it easy if he wanted to stay alive. He gave Jube a scowl and told him he was sure a pal turning those rurales loose on him.

Jube had long yellow hair that hung like dried grass about his face. He was always brushing it out of his eyes with his arm. He didn't look too bright, and Newt was probably the one who had the business sense of the two. When he heard Brock's remark he looked a little more stupid than usual and asked innocently what Brock meant.

"That was me riding that mule along the river," Brock told him.

"You're loco."

"No, I'm not. Why didn't you stop them. I yelled at you."

"Creepin' Ceasar! What in hell were you ridin' that mule for?"

"El Terremoto ran a blazer on me. He knew there was a trap set for him so he foxed me into riding his mule and wearing his duds."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Me, too." Brock still sounded exasperated, but he made out as if he could see it was a reasonable mistake they had made.

"Where's El Terremoto then?"

"He was over at my place the last I saw of him."

"Well, I'll be damned!" He scratched his head and brushed his hair up. "I guess I better tell Newt. You want to come along?"

"No," Brock said, "I don't think I can make it. I got an awful lump on my head." His real reason, of course, was that he wasn't apt to get across the river alive if he went with Jube.

Jube sat down again. Brock knew that he wasn't one to take action without consulting his brother, Newt, but this looked like something he ought to handle by his lonesome. It was pretty clear that he didn't know exactly what Brock suspected, but it was likely not to be the way he was telling it. And Newt would probably raise hell if Jube came back with the story that Brock was still alive.

As a matter of fact, Newt had sent him out along the river to make a check, with instructions to finish what the rurales had begun if he saw anything of him. Jube had made a long prowl down the river. He had seen the padre's cassock caught in a snag in mid-river, and he supposed Brock Willow was somewhere inside of it. He had emptied his gun into it, just to make sure Brock would never come out alive, and then had crossed over and headed for the cantina. It was a lucky thing he had, or all the carefully laid plans they had made with El Terremoto might come to naught. No, he couldn't afford to leave Brock Willow out of his sight again. He had to do something about it, all by his lonesome, and he probably had to take care of the two women the same way.

Jube wore a gun on his right leg, butt forward. A left-handed, cross-draw character, Brock figured. He knew Jube had wanted to get him out in the open. What would happen now, he didn't know. His own gun was in the river. Señora Dubose's rifle was on pegs on the wall. He didn't see any hand guns around, except Jube's. He knew the moment Jube sat down again that this was something that was going to end up in gunsmoke. He could try to jump Jube but, for all he knew, if he got to his feet he might fall flat on his face again, although the food Bonnie had stuffed into him had done him a world of good. He saw Jube's hand move toward his gun, and he figured he might as well drag this out into the open.

"What's on your mind, Jube?" he asked. "Murder?"

Jube jumped and pulled his hand away from his gun. "Why, no—damn it. Why would I have murder on my mind? Who would I want to murder?"

"Me. You tried it once, didn't you?"

"No, sir. Why would I try anything like that?"

"So you and your brother, and that damned Benito, can take over my place for a rustler's station. Yot got it figured out it's a good place to hold wet stock you drive

across the river." It was a stab in the dark but Brock saw it came close to the truth.

JUBE pushed the long yellow hair out of his eyes again. "You better shut your trap, mister."

"The three of you poisoned my stock and tried to blame it on the spooks. You figured you could use the place with a wild tale like that hanging over it, because nobody else would come near the place with stock. That's why you poisoned my herd, instead of running it off. It was a good scheme, but it would have been better if those rurales had been better shots. You better do your own shooting after this, Jube."

"I will, mister. I sure will."

"And tell 'em to be ready for me when I get back there."

"You ain't goin' back there, mister. You ain't goin' nowhere."

Brock grinned crookedly. "I'll be back. If I don't get back there alive I'll spook the place. I'll hex the whole bunch of you to death."

Jube's hand moved a little closer to his gun.

"Keep him covered, Bonnie. Shoot him if he makes a move."

Jube glanced sideways, falling for the old, old trick, and Brock lunged. Jube's gun exploded but the bullet went through the roof. Brock felt a wave of dizziness pour over him, but he pulled out of it and gave Jube a blow on the side of the head that sent him spinning. He tried to get off another shot but before he could level off Brock kicked the gun out of his hand and smashed a pair of fingers with it.

But Brock knew he couldn't last. This one wild spurt was all he could manage. Bonnie started for the gun. Señora Dubose stayed near the wall in the corner. Jube was still reeling back toward her. The wall would stop him, and then he would come in, and Brock would go down under the first blow.

But Jube never got to the wall. Señora Dubose reached up for a trap that hung from the ceiling, and gave it a hard pull. A pulley screeched, and a trap-door came open at her feet. It opened up on a big cool place blasted out of rock where they stored their provisions, and Jube landed square in the middle of it, head on one side, feet on the other. Then he gradually folded up, and slid through, head-first.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Man Who Wouldn't Die

SEÑORA DUBOSE claimed she was the only one in all this stretch of Big Bend country who didn't believe in the ancient Spanish legends. She said she had lived in this land forty years and still had to see her first spook.

"It is all nonsense and abracadabra," she told Brock. "Bewitched water-holes, my foot. It is all something scheming men think up to confuse and bewilder and twist to their own advantage."

"That's what I think, too," Brock agreed.

Bonnie was the only one who registered any doubt. "I know there is Spanish treasure, and it is guarded by patrones."

"How do you know?" her mother muttered irritably. "You never found one."

"I have a map," Bonnie insisted.

"Pah! And so has every *pelado* in the country."

"All the same," Bonnie continued, looking at Brock, "it was witchery that got you out of the Canyon del Hombre Perdido."

"Yeah," Brock agreed, "I guess you're right."

"It was witchery of a kind that is only tricks," the señora insisted. "And I am certain that only that kind of witchery will get you back in again. El Terremoto used a tall tale to steal your place, and you must do the same to get it back."

"What d'you want me to do, go whoopin' and hollerin' around at night? They won't fall for that."

"No, it must be something else. It must be well thought out so it will not explode in your face, like a bad joke. You are alone. You cannot shoot your way back, that is certain. There are too many of them. El Terremoto's bandidos probably believe in these things. At least they have minds that are easily convinced. The Didd brothers' vaqueros, evil as they may be, are probably simple-minded men, too, as this Señor Jubal Didd appeared to be. Now then, let us think what you must do."

Crossing the river again before dawn, Brock Willow had his thinking done. It

didn't exactly satisfy him, but Señora Dubose said it was good, or bad, according to how he worked it out. He had Jube Didd, dead with a broken neck from his headlong fall through the trap door, in tow on a lead horse. He had Jube's gun in his holster with a full load of cartridges—blank ones. Bonnie had spent an hour over them, carefully extracting the lead fangs, and reloading the gun with blanks. It was a scheme to confuse and bewilder, to set man against man, buckaroo against bandido, and then stand off until the slaughter was done. That was what the Señora Dubose expected, if he worked it right, but the nearer he got to the canyon the less he agreed.

He didn't follow the usual trail upstream, but angled north, following one of the Red Veredas for some distance, then cutting in through rough country until he reached his canyon range, which he followed down in the direction of the river again.

Early dawn began to tint the sky by the time he reached the canyon floor. He rode down past familiar landmarks, past the white bones of his horses, already picked clean by carrion birds and beasts. A wolf had the impudence to brass it out over a heap of bones as he moved past, and he didn't bother to drive it off.

The water-hole was deserted. A hundred yards ahead, where his cabin stood, a thin feather of smoke lifted to the sky. There were horses in the corral, and Brock figured both the Didd crew and El Terrmoto's men had arrived. He headed into the willows on the far side of the *tinaja,* and got busy.

Jube didn't have a mark on him, except a slight discoloration on the side of his head. Brock carried him to the water-hole and placed him on the flat rock-shelf close to the edge, arranging the body to his liking. He put his hat on his head, covering the stringy yellow hair, and shoved Jube's gun, with the blank cartridges, back in its owner's holster.

He put some water from the *tinaja* in Jube's canteen and stuck it into the stiff, clawed fingers, leaving it uncapped so it would look like Jube had taken a drink of water on the spot, and dropped down dead in his tracks. When he had it all arranged to his liking, he moved back into the willows, and drove off Jube's horse. Then he mounted the one Bonnie had loaned him, and waited.

The cook was sputtering profanely in the ranchyard, trying to get his fire started. Brock could hear the rattle of pots and pans. He heard an argument develop between two of the men, and die down. Sooner or later, he figured, someone would come to the water-hole for water. He would probably come afoot, so he could carry a bucket. It didn't matter much whether he came afoot or on horseback. What mattered was whether he came armed, or not.

Brock knew the risk he was running, but a man was more likely to leave his gun-belt off for some time after he got up, and he wasn't likely to strap it on for only such a short distance. That was the way it had to be, and that, in the end, was the way it was.

The cook began to yell for water, and finally picked on a man he called Hutch to fetch some. Hutch said he didn't know where to get any, and the cook told him out of the water-hole, for God's sake.

"Hell, man, that water's hexed," Hutch protested. "Don't you know that?"

"I made coffee with it last night," the cook claimed.

"You did?"

"Sure I did. That's just a gag about that water bein' pizen. Hell, man, ain't you got any sense?"

"Well, how would I know?" Hutch came out at last, still dazed with sleep. He carried two buckets. He wasn't armed.

HE SAW Jube's body as soon as he reached the pool, and stopped in his tracks. He stood there for some time looking around, watching the nearby willows and the scattered rocks. Then he set his buckets down and walked around the edge. He stood over the corpse for some time, looking it over from head to foot. Then he looked around at the bushes again, tipping his hat on his forehead and scratching his head. Finally he hunkered down and sniffed at the canteen.

Brock recognized him. He had been with the Didd boys the last time they had come to his place to buy horses. Brock remembered him because he had put on a brag what a good shot he was. Jigging his horse, Brock rode down on him. The puncher heard him come and made an instinctive grab for his missing gun. Then he cussed and glanced

over his shoulder. He stayed on his knees alongside the corpse.

Brock nodded. "I own this place," Brock told him. "What you doing here?"

"Nothin' much," Hutch answered. "You say you own this place?"

"Yeah."

"Is that so? I was told you fell in the river and got drowned," gasped Hutch.

"That's true, but you see I'm back, and I want you to get off my place." Brock's holster was empty, and he saw the puncher take special note of it.

"You better talk with the boss," Hutch said. "Maybe he wouldn't believe me if I said I run into you."

"You can tell him what I said. I want you all to clear out before night."

"I see." Hutch pointed at Jube. "You know what happened to him? He hasn't got a mark on him."

"Possibly he drank some of that water."

"Mebbe-so. But I hear there's nothin' wrong with that water."

Brock shrugged. "A man must find that out for himself."

Hutch glanced toward the cabin, then back at Jube. He didn't get off his knees. Newt had told him what had happened to the owner of this place, and why they were taking it over. But something had gone wrong somewhere, because Brock Willow wasn't supposed to be roaming around, big as life. He was supposed to be in the river, loaded down with rurale lead. Newt wouldn't like it this way. He wouldn't like it at all.

"You better come along with me and talk it over with Newt," Hutch repeated.

Brock shook his head. "You tell him you saw me, and that I want you all off my place before dark."

The puncher suddenly dived for the gun in Jube's holster and came to his feet. "Now come along," he snapped.

Brock smiled and swung his horse away.

"Hold it there, mister," Hutch roared. "Don't move."

Brock kept on going. Hutch raised the gun, and let go, point-blank. Brock steadied the horse, and kept on his way at a slow walk. Hutch fired again, and then, when nothing happened, he emptied the whole load at Brock. It would have cut him to pieces except for Bonnie's patience the night before, taking the lead slugs out of the cartridges, one by one, and throwing them away. As it was, he rode on slowly, smiling back over his shoulder, and disappeared into the willows, leaving Hutch standing there with a blank look on his face, and an empty, smoking gun in his hand.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Owlhoot Shootout

HUTCH went back without water. Newt Didd met him half way on a horse, and wanted to know what all the shooting was about. Newt was darker than Jube, and had a better build, but his face was twisted and scarred from a kick by a shod horse, his nose flattened out, and one eye drawn shut by scar tissue. Brock would hardly have recognized him, because it had happened some time after they had made their last deal.

"If you're just shootin' off your gun to show how good you are, save it for somebody who ain't fed up with your brag," he sputtered irritably.

Hutch explained what had happened. He was angry and disgusted at his poor shooting, and looked a little worried, as if there were something mysterious about it. "I tried to croak him, Newt. I wasn't any more'n from here to you away from him, but not a bullet touched him. Not a one. Damn it, it ain't natural. I cin shave your whiskers ten times the distance."

"Mebbe your gun's out of whack."

"It's Jube's gun. He don't fool with no poor weapons."

"Where'd you get hold of that? Where's Jube?"

"He's back there?"

"You had a row with him?"

"No, I didn't. But he's dead all the same, Newt. I don't know what happened, but he's a goner."

Newt's face twitched, and the scars along his jaw turned white. "Damn you, Hutch. If you—"

"I didn't have nothin' to do with it," Hutch growled. "Go take a look. He ain't got a mark on him."

"Who croaked him then?"

"I don't know. He looked like he'd been taking a drink, and dropped down dead. His canteen was open, and there was still some water in it."

"The hell with that. Either you or Brock Willow shot him."

"I tell you he wasn't shot. Go and see. I didn't have my gun on me. I grabbed this one offn Jube when Willow showed up."

"It better be the way you say, Hutch."

"Oh, shut up."

"I'll git to the bottom of it."

"I wish somebody'd make up their mind whether that water's good or bad. You goin' out there?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll see you in camp."

When Hutch got back, the cook let up a howl because he didn't have any water, and Hutch told him to go fetch it himself, or, better still, go drink his bellyful, and croak. He loaded the gun again and tried it out on a mark, hitting it dead center four times out of five. In a way it made him feel better, and, in a way, it made him feel worse, because it came near proving there was something spooky about it.

"There's nothin' wrong with me," he blustered. "There's somethin' else about it."

"How could he be ridin' a horse out there if he got drowned in the river yesterday?" Ozzie Lunn wanted to know.

"Mebbe he's one of these spooks you hear about in these parts," another puncher laughed.

"Oh, shut your trap," Hutch growled. "I guess I'd know a spook if I seen one, wouldn't I?"

A puncher by the name of Dakota Sharp said he had seen a spook once in Dakota Territory which couldn't be told from the real article. "They look exactly alike," he stated. "I talked with this buzzard, and he talked back at me, and when I got back to the fort I found out he'd been dead two weeks. All he wanted to know, too, was if I had a good time on furlough."

Disgusted, Hutch walked away from the talk. When Newt got back he gave Jube a thorough going over, but he couldn't make out what was wrong with him. He noticed the discoloration on the side of his face, but there wasn't much there, and he could have struck his head on the rocks when he dropped down. He didn't detect that Jube's neck was broken, and he told Hutch, who stood by watching, that he must have had a stroke. He picked Ozzie and Dakota to go bury his brother. "Ride off and find a nice place under a tree," he told them. "Find some good deep ground, and don't just dump him in—you hear?"

He didn't go along himself.

GOOD deep ground was hard to find, and it took them considerable time to get the job done. When they got back they showed Newt where they had buried Jube.

"Off by them willows over there," Ozzie said, pointing. "A couple jaspers showed us where to go. A couple colored jaspers. They said they used to work here."

"Yeah, that's right," Newt nodded. "Brock Willow used to have a couple colored men workin' for him. Did you do a good job?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but a funny thing happened, Newt," Dakota stated. "They showed us exactly where to dig, and then they walked off and we went to work. We had the hole about half dug when they came back and said they had made a mistake, and they would just as soon we didn't dig right there because—well, because they said they was buried there."

"They did?"

"Yeah. Did you ever hear the beat?"

"You sure you got it straight what they said."

"That's exactly what they said."

"What'd you do?"

"They walked off into the willows again, and we went ahead. We didn't want to start a new hole, because it would make us look kinda silly, wouldn't it? We went ahead—and we run into a couple jaspers down there."

"Now, listen," Newt flared. "I don't want to hear any more of that kind of damn fool talk around here. I've heard enough of it from Hutch, half-baked ideas that he don't know what the hell he's talking about."

"Well, I'm just tellin' you what happened," Dakota insisted.

"It's a fact, Newt," Ozzie put in.

"What're you tryin' to tell me—that you were talkin' to a couple of spooks? Is that it?"

"Well, no, Newt, but, damn it—you tell me what you make of it."

"They knowed somebody else was planted there, that's all there's to it," Newt blustered. "They was hurrawing you."

"Mebbeso," Ozzie agreed, but he sounded unconvinced. "If you add that up to what

you ran into, Hutch, I'd say there was somethin' pretty damn' queer goin' on around here."

Newt cussed and asked sarcastically if they had had any more talk with their two spooks.

"Well, yes," Ozzie admitted grudgingly. "They come back again when we started to fill the hole, and said mebbe we ought to keep it open."

"What for?"

"You won't like to hear this, Newt, but they said mebbe you'd like to be planted there with Jube."

"Wasn't that nice of them. Did they use my name?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be damned. I s'pose they told you who was goin' to croak me, too?"

"That Mexican bandido we seem to be hookin' up with."

"Is that so?"

"That's what they said."

"Seems like they know all about us."

"It does, at that."

"And after all this talk I s'pose you let 'em walk off again?"

"Why, sure. They was pleasant-spoken, even if they was spooks. At any rate, I wasn't goin' to try Hutch's stunt on 'em. If they're spooks, all right, but I ain't goin' to try to prove it."

"Judas Priest," Newt muttered. "You must be losin' yore mind."

"I wouldn't be a-tall surprised," Ozzie muttered sourly.

NEWT was more concerned than he let on. In the back of his mind he had a sneaking suspicion that he couldn't trust the Mexican bandido any further than he could throw him. And it was entirely possible Benito had had something to do with what had happened to Jube.

They had agreed to split three ways on the deal they had made to rustle wet stock of all kinds back and forth across the river, making this canyon, out of which they had driven Brock Willow, their main headquarters. But he knew the deal didn't satisfy Benito. He wanted a fifty-fifty split, taking half the profits himself, and letting Jube and Newt split the rest. Now, with Jube out of the way, there wasn't any sound reason why Newt could claim any more than half, and it might explain what had happened to Jube. Besides, Jube had had a map in his possession, showing the location of two bags of buried gold that was said to be worth thirty thousand dollars. He had pokered it off an old coot in San Antone, and as soon as they got some time they had meant to dig for it. Newt knew the general location of the spot, but the map was gone. He had given Jube a thorough search before letting Ozzie and Dakota ride off with him, but the map was gone.

Benito, who was a crank on tales of buried treasure, like so many folks in these parts, might have gotten wind of what Jube had, and fed him a dose of poison to get his hands on it. Newt figured he was due for a talk with the fat little fox who called himself El Terremoto—a real turkey talk.

El Terremoto's outfit of bandidos had a camp of their own nearer the river, and as soon as Newt was sure Ozzie and Dakota had told him everything that had happened under the willow tree, he rode over.

A man called Mocho, because of a bullet-gotched ear, was Benito's segundo. He said Benito was suffering the deepest agonies because of a high lonesome he had had with a jug of *tequila,* and anyone who approached him within gun range did so at his peril.

"He is very low in his mind, señor," Mocho warned. "It would be wise to—"

"Mine's just as low," Newt snapped. "Get him."

Mocho shrugged, pointed and walked away.

Benito was flat on his back on the ground in an isolated spot, grunting and groaning his agony away. When he heard Newt he peeked out from under the big hat he had over his face and tried to sit up. "My friend," he spoke up in his gentle, agonized voice, "you find me in great trouble."

"It'll be worse before I leave," Newt told him. "You and Jube and me made a square deal to split our take three ways, and now you're knifin' us in the back."

"*Por Dios,* no!" Benito exclaimed in horror. "I do nothing of the kind."

"Jube's dead—poisoned."

Benito let out a sympathetic cluck, and put his hand over his stomach. "I can sympathize with him."

"You don't need to bother. All I came here to tell you is that the deal we made

stays the same. You git a third, and I take Jube's share."

"But, señor," Benito exclaimed in still greater horror, heaving to his feet and swaying dizzily, "that is impossible. It cannot be."

"It sure can," Newt told him. "You croaked Jube so it would fix things up on a fifty-fifty basis, but I'm not goin' for it—you understand. Everything we pull in here we split the way we made the deal, including that bunch Don Salamon's driving up."

Benito looked around. His men had a fire going some distance away. There was a smell of grub in the air, and for a moment it gave him a sick twinge, but he held his breath until it drifted away, and then turned toward Mocho, who seemed to be minding some business of his own off to one side.

Benito caught his eye, and must have made some kind of warning signal, because Mocho started angling off to one side so Newt would stand in a crossfire, just in case this trouble built up to something serious. With these preliminaries settled, Benito's voice lost some of its usual gentleness.

"Why should it be that you take more than I, señor? I have as many men as you. They must eat the same as yours. They will surely hang as high as yours if the *empleados* catch them. No, señor, we must make a new deal."

"I thought that's what you were up to, but it won't work, not by a long shot. I cin see now I wasn't very smart throwin' in with you, but I'm gettin' smarter every day, and I cin see now it was a damfool stunt to kill off all them horses. We could just as well have run 'em off, and cleaned up on them, too. Why didn't we ride in here and clean Willow out with a gun? That would've been the way to do it. The trouble with you is, you're so damned crooked you've got to do everything snaky, or it don't look right to you."

"You forget, señor. It was important to let the rurales think they had killed me. They will leave this country alone now for some time to come. It was wise to build up a notion that this canyon was *embrujada* so others would avoid it. That we have done, with salt from the Guadalupes, sprinkled with poison."

"It's so damned *embrujada* it's spooked my men half out of their wits. I s'pose you figured on that, too, so they'd pull out, and give you the bulge all the way around."

"It is an idea," Benito agreed.

"But don't figure on it workin, mister. We'll have a showdown first, señor—the soner the better."

"Sí, the sooner the better," Benito agreed, and went for his gun.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Canyon's Secret

NEWT and Benito stood about half way between the two camps. At the first shot they all came to life. Hutch saw Newt go down and got the whole crew in the saddle in jig time. They scattered out thinly, each one a lone wolf, playing a lone hand in what was shaping up as a deadly shoot-out for them all.

Benito, still sick as a dog to his stomach from the *tequila,* and a little sicker because Newt's shot had slashed into his belly, ran back, holding his hand over his paunch, and howled at his crew until he got them all mounted, and climbed a horse himself. Mocho, whose shot had downed Newt, did the same. They had nine men altogether, against Newt's seven. They came together head on, both sides rolling down hill into the hollow some distance past the spot where Newt had dropped.

"There ain't a one of them double-crossin' buzzards goin' to ride out of here," Hutch yelled at Ozzie. "Remember that."

"Sure Mike. We'll give them sky buzzards another treat, if they cin stomach that kind of meat."

Dakota Sharp rode nearby, silent and glum, still bothered with the queer encounter at Jube's grave. Benito cupped a hand around his mouth and yelled to his men, but Hutch couldn't make out what it was. He didn't keep it up long because he got too busy dodging lead. He lost two men in the first clash. They went off their horses like jacks-in-a-box, popping up all arms and legs. Then they hit the ground and rolled and bounced until their momentum was spent. The two horses bolted out of sight. One of Newt's crew went down, but he got a foot fouled in the saddle gear and got dragged off, his horse spooked out of all reason.

The two crews rode through each other, and swung back for a repeat performance. Two bandidos went off their horses behind the corral and used their carbines through the poles. Hutch saw Dakota Sharp go down with a rifle bullet through his skull, and flushed out the two bandidos, circling the corral on a dead run. They both got off a shot at him, but they were hurried, and missed, and Hutch emptied his gun into them as he rode past, half for one and half for the other. When he came into the open again he saw a bandido a-foot, making for Brock's cabin, and he rode him down, smashing his skull with the barrel of his gun like an Indian with a war club.

A wounded horse, probably blinded, crashed into Mocho's animal, and sent them all to the ground. Leather snapped and horses screamed. Both animals got up, but Mocho stayed on his knees, one leg crushed. He tallied two of Newt's punchers before Ozzie rode in, and downed him for good with a stream of lead that tore him to pieces.

One of Newt's own men, with a bellyful of the fight, tried to ride off by his lonesome. Hutch went after him and shot him down from behind. He came to his feet again in a rolling leap, and stood there while Hutch rode past. "I wasn't runnin' out," he yelled.

"It looked like it, Shally," Hutch yelled back, and shot him once again. Then he rode back.

The ranchyard simmered with gunsmoke. A stack of hay was afire, farther back. Empty cartridges *clinked* against his horse's hoofs. A man was draped over the corral fence, legs twisted in the poles, his fingertips touching the ground. He couldn't shake himself loose, although he tried several times, and each try was weaker than the last, as his life's blood ran into the ground. How, in God's name, Hutch thought, could a man get himself into such a fix?

His horse was seeping blood from a skin wound, but it was nothing serious. Hutch himself didn't have a mark. He saw where Ozzie had gone down, both horse and man, the ground stripped for twenty feet where they had made a sliding dive. Ozzie was torn to pieces, his jaw ripped open in what looked like a big laugh. It almost turned Hutch's stomach.

As well as Hutch could tell, Benito had lost all his men, and it looked like he hadn't fared any better. He rode around, and counted them off, and came out with the right figure. With a venomous twist of his lips he emptied his gun into a bandido who was still kicking his legs. He had three cartridges left in his belt, and fed them into the cylinder. He had a mind to go and see if Newt was done for, and when he rode past the cabin, Benito hobbled out toward him on foot, limping, and firing his gun in a wild drum-roll of sound. And then Hutch did what the rurales had bragged to Bonnie Dubose about doing. Hutch did it with one shot, and when the bullet hit Benito, he whipped his free hand to his belly, and twisted down, like a corkscrew going into the ground.

"I reckon," Hutch muttered, "that makes a clean sweep, an' I'm damn sure I never seen the beat in all my life."

NEWT DIDD was sitting up when Hutch rode at him. A bullet had slashed him along the ribs, and another had made a groove along one leg between the knee and hip, but he wasn't in bad shape. Hutch had a hunch he had sat out the fight, but he didn't say anything.

"I made a tally, Newt," he announced, "and we ain't got a man left, only you and me."

"Is that so?"

"What the hell ailed you, startin' somethin' like that?"

"It's the way it worked out, that's all. Git me up."

Hutch helped him to his feet.

"You got any idea where we cin find Benito?" Newt asked.

"Yeah, I know."

"That damned bandit's got Jube's map. That's half the reason he double-crossed us like this."

They walked back to the cabin, and searched Benito from head to foot, but they didn't find the map.

"Okay." Newt finally gave up. "Let it go. I know the place. We'll go over there and we'll dig till hell freezes over to git that cash. It's a big cache of dinero, Hutch, and we'll need it to set us up again. See if you cin find a pick and shovel."

"Now just a minute," Hutch muttered. "Just how much diggin' do you think you cin do?"

"I'm laid up, Hutch, but I cin tell you where to dig."

"Yeah," Hutch growled. "I might've expected you to hit on somethin' like that."

* * *

Brock Willow saw the big fight from the mouth of the cave where he had holed up. He heard the first shot that was fired, and saw Newt go down. He heard the last one from Hutch's smoking gun, and saw Benito take to the ground, and it set him to wondering bleakly what retribution lay in store for a man who would hide treachery and murder behind a padre's robe. The haystack went on burning for some time, and Willie and Friend, who were with him, saw a season's work go up in smoke.

"Lor'amighty!" Willie sighed. "All mah sweat, an' all mah toil."

"I'se had a hand in that, too, Willie," Friend reminded him gently.

"You he'ped," Willie conceded.

Brock had found the two men hiding in the cave. With considerable reluctance they told him they weren't freemen, and the padre on the liver-and-white saddle mule had warned them that Brock had sent for the *empleados* to take them away, and they had hidden out just in case it might be true. They could see now it was just a trick to get them out of the way, and they were glad they hadn't gone any farther than the cave.

When Brock had seen Ozzie Lunn and Dakota Sharp set out to bury Jube he had sent the two men down with careful instruction as to what to say, and from all indications they had done a good job. Willie reported that the two men seemed only too glad to take their advice, but when they started on that nonsense about being buried there themselves, on the spot where Brock himself had buried the two bandidos several months ago, Willie said he could see it gave the two men a queer, jumpy feeling. Brock had hoped for one of two things—either to build up an atmosphere of queer goings-on that would finally spook the whole gang clear out of the canyon, or stir up a fight between Newt's gang and Benito's bandidos that would wind up in gunsmoke.

It had ended up in a fight, and it had cut the odds down to where he figured he could handle it, and make his play to get back the Canyon del Hombre Perdido, possibly in time to take delivery on the horses Don Salamon was driving up. What had happened would set him back a long time, but with the way things were working out, he could start over. And this time it wouldn't be alone—if Bonnie Dubose meant half of what she had let him believe the night before.

He watched Newt Didd and Hutch catch up their horses, and ride off. Newt apparently was wounded. Hutch had to help him on his horse. They took a pick and shovel that belonged to Brock, and he expected them to go to work burying the dead bandidos and punchers, but they didn't. They left them for the buzzards, and rode up the canyon, hugging the malpais along the westerly edge.

Brock went after them, circling past the cabin to get a gun. Before he got there he ran across a puncher wedged between two rocks—it was the one who had gotten fouled in the stirrup—and he took his belt and gun, and picked up Newt's trail north of the cabin. He had no clear idea what they were up to. They wouldn't be apt to take a pick and shovel if they meant to clear out. And they certainly would have loaded up on what provisions were left in the cabin. He didn't understand it, but he meant to trail them until he did.

IT WAS rough going. He seldom came this way because the graze was poor, but there was a trail of sorts, over rock and talus, and he followed it. He didn't catch sight of Newt and Hutch again, but after he had been riding an hour he heard a horse whinny, and pulled up behind some rocks. His own animal tried to answer, and he stopped it. He heard the clatter of hoofs on rock, and then saw the rider. It was Señora Dubose. She rode a paint horse Brock had given her several years ago.

Apparently, she was looking for Bonnie. She called her name several times, cupping her hands around her mouth so the sound would carry. Brock rode out and showed himself, and she came toward him, an exasperated look on her face.

"If you ever have a daughter, Señor Brock," she stated, "chain her up, and feed her hay."

"What's the trouble?"

"Bonnie's gone treasure hunting."

"Well, that's quite a pastime around here. I wouldn't expect that to worry you."

"It does, with all the commotion going on around here."

"There was quite a battle going on back there a while ago," Brock confessed. "I reckon you heard the shooting."

"I did, and I never expected to see you alive again."

"I turned spook, and kept out of it. Have you any idea where Bonnie might be?"

"I know she crossed the river. She found a new map—off that rascal who dived into our cellar, and broke his neck. She went through his pockets when we weren't looking and found it. She told me about it this morning, and said she meant to give it to you because of your misfortunes. But I discovered she took a pick and shovel, and I think she means to find the treasure first, and turn that over to you. She probably figured you would never dig for it, because you laugh at all these tales."

Brock didn't laugh now. He didn't even smile, because he suddenly realized what Newt and Hutch were up to. They probably knew about Jube's map, at least Newt would, and they had gone off to hunt for the treasure or cache, or whatever it might be. And if Bonnie followed the map, she would meet them there, face to face.

"Señora Dubose," he said, as if suddenly recalling something that had slipped his mind, "I think if you go across the canyon, and follow the trail north for some distance you will find her."

"I have been there," Señora Dubose objected.

"Try it again," Brock urged, desperately anxious all of a sudden to get rid of her so he could hurry on without adding to her uneasiness. "I think I saw a rider over there a while ago, and it probably was Bonnie. I'm going up along this side, and if I see her, I'll tell her you're looking for her."

"Very well," Señora Dubose agreed finally. "But remember what I say, if you ever have a daughter, chain her up and feed her hay."

Brock found Bonnie a half hour later. He heard her voice, coming out from behind an outcrop of rock. Newt and Hutch were there. Apparently, Bonnie had found what she was looking for, and Newt was telling Hutch to go in and take it. "You was worried about doin' a little work, Hutch, but now all you got to do is go in, an' take it."

"You keep your hands off that stuff," Bonnie flared.

"Go on, Hutch."

"She'll brain me with that pick," Hutch objected.

"Now look, sweetheart," Newt went on, "get out of that hole you dug. All we want is them two gunnysacks. Do what I say, and we'll let you climb yore horse, an' ride off like a lady."

"I'm no lady." Bonnie stood her ground.

NEWT cursed savagely, and told Hutch again to go in and grab the bags.

"I'm tellin' you, Newt, I'll git that damn' pick through my brains."

"You sure will," Bonnie warned.

"Holy Judas!" Newt snarled. "I never saw the beat."

"Why don't you try it yoreself?" Hutch flared.

"I'm shot up, man. I can't lift that stuff. But, look, lady, I cin handle this gun, and I'm a-goin' to, if you don't move—pronto."

Brock came in on foot. He saw Newt make the threatening move with his gun, and told him to reach high. Newt had his back turned. Hutch saw Brock first. A sick look spread across his face, but he pulled himself together in a second, and went for his gun.

"Down in that hole, Bonnie," Brock yelled.

Hutch fired and the bullet cut into Brock's arm. It flung him around but it didn't knock him down. He got off a shot and Hutch dived for the hole, but Bonnie swung the pick at him, and he shied off. Newt went off his horse on the far side, firing before he went overboard, but he missed his shot.

Hutch was a dead shot. Brock had heard him brag, and he was probably telling the truth. With a gun full of loaded cartridges, he could out-shoot Brock, and stand a good chance of coming out of this with a whole skin. But he made the mistake of trying to get under cover. He might have gotten off a second shot in the time it took to dive for the hole, and finished Brock off. But this way Brock had his chance. Hutch was sprawled on the ground, and made a hard target, but Brock's first shot crashed into

his shoulder, tearing off an ear on the way, and more than likely went clear down into his lung. He squirmed and threshed like a snake, and rolled for the hole again, but Bonnie managed to beat him off with the pick.

"Get down," Brock yelled again, and Bonnie Dubose crouched down out of sight.

Hutch got off another shot, but it hit a rock, because he was so close to the ground, and whined off into space. Then in sheer venom, he put his gun over the edge of the hole, and would have shot Bonnie, but Brock's next slug struck him in the neck, and, after what that did to him, he never moved again.

Newt couldn't get his eye. His horse bolted and he crawled behind an outcrop. He emptied his gun while Hutch and Brock were shooting it out, but he missed them all. He had time to reload while Brock spent his time on Hutch.

Brock had three shots left. The gun-butt felt sleazy, and he flicked blood off his fingertips. His first shot hit the outcrop, and whined off, but Newt let out a yelp. A piece of rock must have hit him. The slug didn't. Brock sweat it out, hoarding his shots. Newt didn't show himself. He probably was working his way along the outcrop, and would pop up at some unexpected place for a shot.

Bonnie climbed out of the hole, and ran for her horse. She had a carbine in the boot.

"Okay, Bonnie," Brock yelled, "circle around and flush him out. Keep out of range of his gun."

It brought results. Newt showed himself, and before he could get back down, Brock fired. Newt came up straight, then bent double as if he had suddenly gotten a hard cramp. He fell forward across the outcrop, arms flung around the stone, but he pulled himself together for one more try. It came nowhere near Brock, and he went down again so he hung forward over the outcrop. Brock's last shot struck him in the spine, cutting a groove down his back, smashing bone and tissue, and finally danced off into space. It killed Newt Didd, horse-thief, instantly.

"That's all, Bonnie," Brock yelled. "Come on back." Then he slid down and hit the ground. He figured everything was taken care of now.

THE Canyon del Hombre Perdido was a peaceful place again. Don Salamon's horses grazed on the good grass. Willie and Friend had strung a wire across the canyon to keep them off the graze where Benito had spread the poisoned Guadalupe salt. There had been a rain, but Brock figured it was best not to run any risk with this new bunch until there had been several good soakers to wash away the salt. In a short time, it all would be fresh and clean again. Willie and Friend cleaned up around the ranchhouse where the big shoot-out between Benito's bandidos and Newt Didd's gun-hawks had occurred. They buried the dead in one big hole near the spot where Ozzie Lunn and Dakota Sharp had planted Jube Didd, working like slaves again, to make amends for running off to keep their freedom.

Bonnie and Señora Dubose stayed at the cabin and nursed Brock. They had him on his feet again inside of a week. Señora Dubose was put out because Brock had sent her across the canyon on a wild-goose chase when he knew all the time where Bonnie was, but she got over it. Bonnie was disappointed because the treasure she had found turned out to be some silver ore, worth possibly twenty dollars in all.

"Like all spook's gold," Brock told her with a grin, "you can't ever quite get hold of it."

"But I mean to keep on trying," Bonnie said.

Señora Dubose frowned. "Now that you are soon to be married to Señor Brock, you must put your mind on more sensible things."

"What," Bonnie inquired, "is more sensible than to hunt for treasure? You just tell me."

"To find it," Brock said, with another grin. "I found mine, and I didn't go looking in a hole in the ground for it." He kept his eyes on her, telling her the rest, until her eyes shone back with sheer joy.

Señora Dubose frowned at both of them. "Let me remind you, Señor Brock," she said, "that what I told you about a daughter is also true about a wife. Now I must go to the cantina."

THE END

# FENCE MEANS

**Rod Elliot vowed he'd build the syndicate's fence across the bullet-blasted bodies of his partners, and save the honest cow-folks of Canadian Valley from the bloody range war that threatened. . . . Though Elliot knew that when pay-day came, his boss—the only man to call him friend—would settle with lead slugs instead of silver dollars. . . .**

## CHAPTER ONE

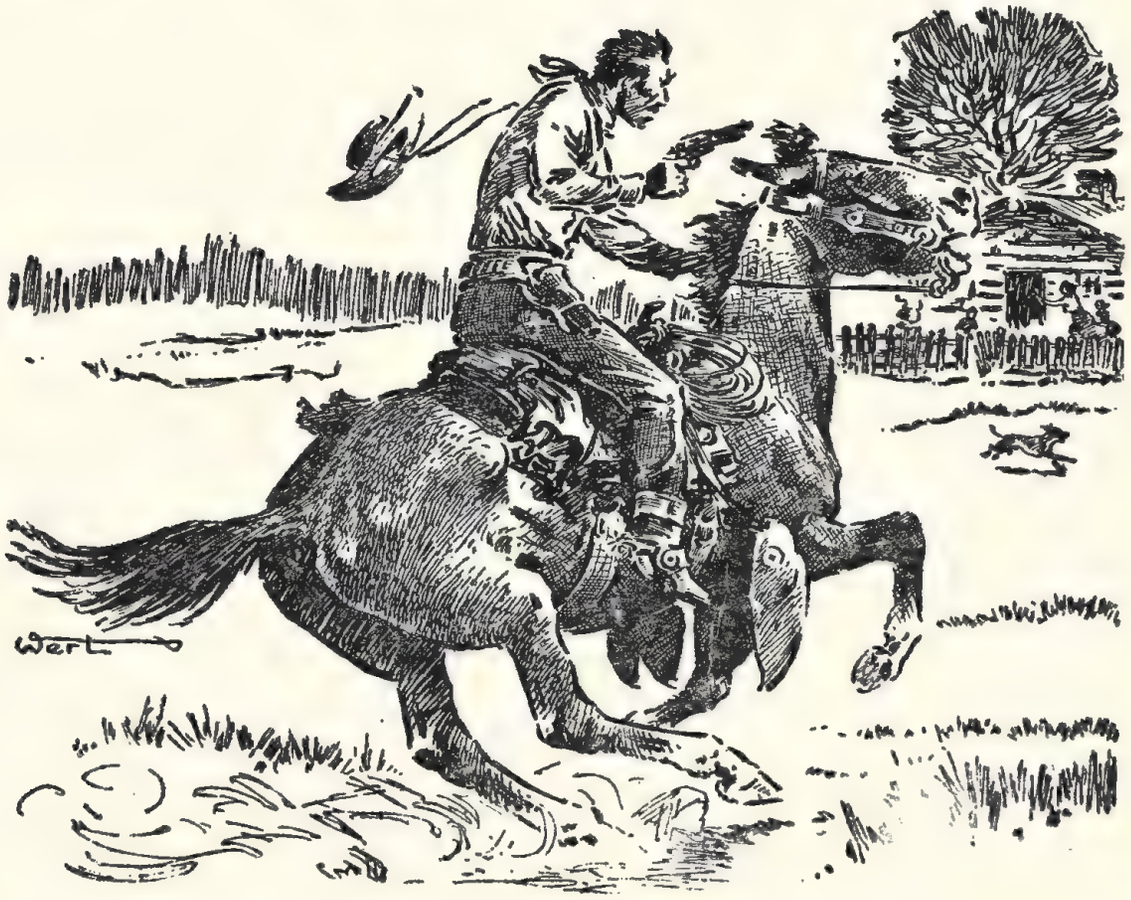
### Death in the Rain

ROD ELLIOT'S hand slipped and skin ripped off his knuckles for the twentieth time that day. He tested the chain's grip around the bundle of fence posts, grunted in satisfaction and straightened up. Water streamed off his yellow, mud-caked slicker. When he tilted his head to see the cliff top rain beat against his eyes and ran down the furrows of his face. He waved his hand and the chain-bound bundle of posts started to slip up the canyon wall.

It had been like this for a week now. Fourteen hours a day. Another day of it and water would pour down the canyon and a month's cutting of posts would pile

# FENCE MEANS FIGHT! ★ ★ ★

**By Thomas Thompson**



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up like a jumble of matches on a bunkhouse poker table. And racing the flood was the war cloud that hung ever closer to the string of posts Elliot was setting for the FB Syndicate. A line of posts he knew would serve his friends, the small ranchers, as well as the foreign-owned and locally managed FB, for a fence has two sides. But there were some, like Ben Fransen, who couldn't see it that way, and Elliot figured maybe Ben had reasons.

Twice now Fransen had tried to break the thin skin of trouble that grew tauter by the minute. Twice now Elliot had swallowed his pride and went on setting posts. But his crew was tired; nerves were raw. A man could take only so much. He stopped suddenly, realizing that Jake Cavenish, head of the small ranchers, had used those same words. Yes, Cavenish had spoken the truth.

Up on the lip of the canyon Gomez, the old Mexican, goaded a yoke of oxen. Cloven hoofs bit into the mud and the chain became taut. The oxen leaned into the yoke and down at the bottom of the wall the bundle of posts began rising. The Mexican grinned, letting the rain drip off the ends of his mustache. Tough hombre, that Elliot, he thought. Work like a loco and want everybody else to do the same.

As soon as the posts were on top they'd be loaded by the waiting two-man crew onto one of the wagons; then they'd be hauled out to the partially completed sixty-mile drift fence. While the men loaded the wagon, the chain would go back down to where Rod Elliot and his four helpers were ready with another bundle of posts. With Elliot

# FIGHT! ★ ★ ★

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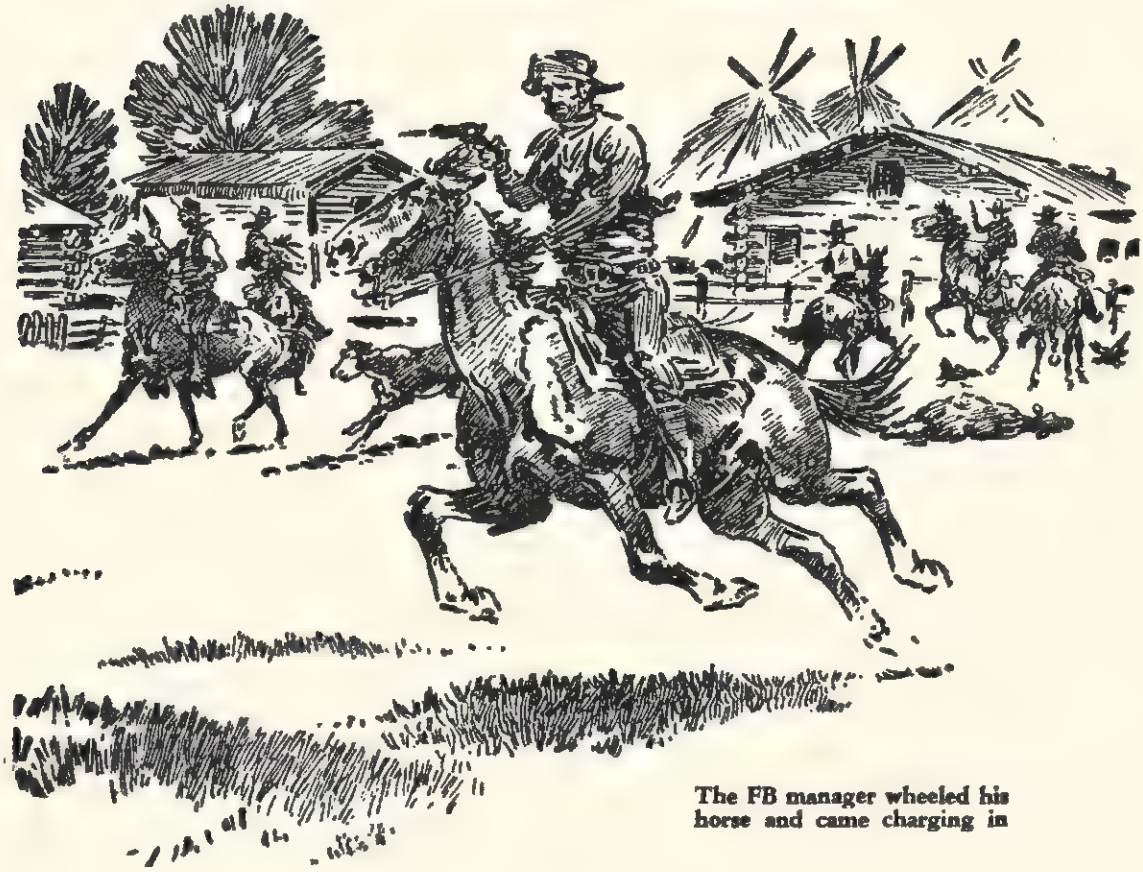

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everything had to move with precision. It was like that when a man fought time, prejudice and an empty pocketbook.

Gomez yelled encouragement to the oxen. A new sound came then, and he turned. His eyes widened, his yell turned to a terror-stricken scream, twisted to a never finished warning. He tried to run. A bullet caught him in the chest and sent him sprawling backwards. He stumbled and fell; red mud geysered up and out away from the weight of his body. After that the rain fell steadily into his sightless eyes.

The oxen stood for a second in spread-legged stupidity, their eyes rolling toward the four masked riders who came into the post camp from two directions. Another rattle of gunfire and the beasts plunged against the weight of the post load that dragged at the end of the chain. A Mexican fence-worker ran from the tent shelter, hatless, coatless, unarmed. He dropped there in the mud without ever seeing who killed him. There was a partially loaded wagon and a six-mule team. The team reared and plunged, then turned directly into the path of another team that had started out on a run with an empty wagon. The wheels locked and the wagons spilled. Traces broke; the mules scattered.

Two masked men piled out of their saddles, ran forward and, with knives, slashed every piece of harness in sight. They went to the tent, severed the ropes, slashed at the canvas. The other two picked up one of the posts and drove it against everything that was left unbroken. They piled into their saddles then and wheeled back in the direction of Tascosa. The rain closed in in a solid curtain, washing out the tracks, hiding the raiders from sight in a matter of seconds. The rain sluiced down on two dead men.

THE yoke of oxen, still tugging against its burden, pulled the bundle of posts over the lip of the canyon. They dragged them through the thick mud to where they would be loaded. Then they stopped and stood there, waiting for the chain to be unhooked. In time they became impatient and pawed angrily at the mud that sucked at their hoofs.

In the drenching breaks in the canyon bottom Elliot and his four men packed newly-cut posts out of the brush and laid them on a crude cradle at the cliff base. With this loading table Rod had figured out they could make up the load and have it ready by the time the chain came down. Then they'd merely slip the chain around the bundle, secure it and signal Gomez to start his oxen. It was just one more short cut Elliot had had to figure out since taking the FB fence building contract.

Elliot realized he had the best crew that ever worked at any job. He had pushed them beyond all endurance. He had had to whip them with his fists a couple of times to show who was boss. For two weeks they had lived on beans and promises, and still they stuck and did a job because he asked them to; because they knew he was trying to fence off a war.

The four men came out of the thicket, each man packing a post on his shoulder, walking at almost a dog trot. Under the beard and mud Rod knew two of them were Anglos, two Mexican, and he wondered what difference it made. On the payroll their names were down as Chico, Morales, Stuffy and Galt. That hadn't looked quite formal enough so Rod had put a Mister in front of each name and let it go at that. They didn't look like men who wanted to be pressed for formalities, any of them, but he'd go a long way to find better workers, and at the moment that was all that counted.

He looked up into the rain, cursed as he saw the bundle of posts jerk crazily. "That damn Gomez must think them oxen are race horses," he grumbled.

The rain made a thunderous racket in his ears. The two Mexicans and Stuffy and Galt tossed their posts into the pile. They thudded noisily, the pile shifted and other posts rolled against the cradle. The rain pounded so hard now they had to shout to one another, but Rod caught the high-pitched yell from the cliff top. He cocked his head, trying to hear more. There was a sound almost like gunshots; or it could have been posts tossed on a wagon bed. Fear grabbed at the pit of Rod's stomach. The post-cutters had returned to the thicket for another load. Apparently they had heard nothing.

"Nerves," Elliot said sullenly. "As soon as I get these damn posts out of the canyon I'm gonna sleep for a week."

Actually he knew there'd be no rest until the sixty-mile fence was built and the FB

Syndicate had paid him off. When that fence was in, Frank Kelly of the FB would have no reason to fight; Cavenish and the small ranchers, Rod knew, would welcome peace. If Ben Fransen still wanted trouble, then it would show him up for exactly what Elliot knew him to be—a big scale maverick who saw in barbed wire his worst enemy. Rod was willing to make it personal between Fransen and himself then, but not as long as it might mean setting off the short fuse that led to the fence war hovering over the valley.

Now he waited impatiently at the bottom of the canyon, wondering what was holding Gomez. It took only minutes to unfasten the chain, get the oxen back to the edge of the cliff and drop the chain down for another load. The men, dulled into pieces of machinery by fatigue, had gotten to the point where they did things automatically, without a hitch.

The sky had turned black, and the rain doubled in intensity so that when he looked up he couldn't see what was going on up there on the canyon rim. He knew only that Gomez was taking too much time.

Galt and the others came out of the thicket. They stood there, hollow-eyed, saying nothing, water streaming from their faces. Rod saw the questions in their minds when they noticed the chain had not come down. "Have to go up there and wake 'em up I guess," Elliot said.

Chico grinned. "My leedle brother José, he's a lazy one. I told you he should be down here where I could watch heem."

Just conversation; just something to say. But at the end of ten minutes there was no more conversation among the four men at the bottom of the canyon. Something was wrong up on top and they knew it.

"Somebody hurt, maybe," Galt said.

IMPROBABLE as hell, Elliot knew. The posts, heavy as they were, weren't likely to cause anyone serious damage. The possibility of a load shifting on one of the stake bed wagons was remote. If trouble had hit the post camp it was not accidental, and each man here knew it. The lanky cowpuncher called Stuffy said, "You want I should go up and have a look-see, boss?"

Elliot tried to sound off-hand about it. "Getting pretty late anyway. We all better go up. We can load up the kid so he can get an early start in the morning. That way we won't waste no time."

"Sure," Galt said. Rod noticed the man had opened his slicker, reached inside and adjusted the gun belt he always wore, even when working. The others went over to the small tarp-covered lean-to they had built. Chico came back with the shotgun that seemed to be a constant part of him, "Because I might see a duck," as he always said. The one called Morales never appeared to carry a weapon, but Rod had the feeling that close examination would disclose a knife in his boot. Stuffy and Galt were both six-shooter men and made no bones about it. Rod never packed a gun on the job; he felt his fists could handle anything that came up.

Together, then, the five climbed the trail cut in the canyon wall. Rod took the lead; Chico, with his shotgun, brought up the rear. The wind shifted and rain beat into their faces.

They had no business knocking off this early, Elliot knew. They stood a chance of losing the rest of the posts in the canyon's bottom. But now they knew something was wrong. They pulled themselves up the last steep jog of the trail, and there the soggy plain stretched out in all directions, humping into half-hearted hills to the east, where it rolled down into the broad Canadian Valley.

They saw the oxen first, standing patiently, still hitched to the chain. Then they saw the wheel-locked wagons, stooped down and hunched against each other like wrestlers on one knee. After that they realized that the things there in the mud were dead men.

There was only the sucking complaint of boots against mud, then; the soft curses of men dangerously near the breaking point. Chico found his kid brother dead, there near the wagon. The Mexican made a whimpering sound in his throat. Galt kept feeling his gun inside his slicker, as if to make sure it was there.

Elliot clenched and unclenched his hands. He was tall, lean and hard, and there was the look of a man who will take no more in his gray eyes. Chico came and stood beside him. He said, "They keel my baby brother. I get him a good job and try to raise him so he don't be a *bandido* and now they keel heem anyway. I leave now. I keel every

damn gringo I find." He broke the shotgun and shoved in two shells. Elliot's fist caught the Mexican on the point of the chin.

As the man fell Elliot caught him, holding his body away from the mud. He said softly, "I'm sorry as hell, Chico. You know I'm sorry as hell. You gettin' yourself killed won't help any." He looked at the others. They didn't meet his eyes. Morales had taken a knife from somewhere. He was whetting the blade on his palm.

"We're ready, boss," Galt said softly.

Elliot shook his head. "Ben Fransen and Gib Baudry will pay for this," he said dully. "But not with war, because that's what they want. You boys make Gomez and the kid decent. When Chico comes around you tell him I'm sorry as hell."

He caught up the horse he had bought from Frank Kelly; it still wore the FB brand. Then he rode through the curtain of rain, and behind him his men watched him go. He looked even bigger on horseback. A bull of a man willing to fight the devil to keep peace in the valley. A man who would do what he set out to do, even against Ben Fransen.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Battle Lines

IT WAS morning when Elliot rode his Syndicate horse into the Syndicate-hating town. The rain had let up some, and he crossed the bridge, past the lumber yard, rode straight up Bridge Street and turned left, coming to the little cottage set back from the street. There was no sign of life in the made-over adobe. Elliot followed the fence and rode around to the back, picking out a window he knew well. Then he dismounted.

The third time he rapped he heard the complaint of bed springs, then a grumbled, "What the hell?" There was the soft pad of the bare feet of a heavy man against an uncarpeted floor. The man kept behind the protection of the thick wall and said, "What is it?"

"It's me, Jake," Rod Elliot said. "I got to make talk with you."

"Since when can't you come in by the front door?" Cavenish asked.

"My camp was raided yesterday. Two of my men were killed. I want to know what you know about it, Jake. Let me in."

For a long time there was no answer. Then: "Maybe you better come inside, Rod."

"I just want to know if this is war or is Fransen still acting on his own," Elliot said.

"Ben's a hard man to handle at times," Cavenish said slowly. "He still has his own ideas about things. There's some starting to see it his way." The old man's voice was weary. He said, "Come in a while and cool off sensible like, Rod. Betty will fix up some breakfast."

"See you later, Jake," Elliot said. He knew all he wanted to know. If the small valley ranchers had decided to go to war with the Syndicate, Cavenish would know, and he wouldn't be afraid to say so. Ben Fransen and his hired ape, Gib Baudry, were still operating on their own. But why in hell couldn't Frank Kelly of the FB see it that way? Rod Elliot cursed. The answer was too obvious for comfort, had been for a month. Kelly wanted war too. Land was cheap when a dead man owned it.

Elliot was never a man to do things half way once he was mad; Fransen needed to be told things. Rod rode back to Bridge Street, turned right on Main across the creek. Tascosa was still asleep. He tied his horse in front of Jim East's saloon, three blocks from the corner.

He went inside and had three whiskeys. Later Rod went outside, walked around the corner on Water Street and stopped in front of the third building. The sign on the door said BEN FRANSEN, LICENSED SURVEYOR. Then under that in smaller letters, *Real Estate Loans*. Elliot knocked; when there was no answer he stepped back and lunged his shoulder against the panel. The hasp splintered. The door flew open, spilling him half way across the room.

The office was cluttered. A flat table was near the far corner, covered with papers. There was a tin can half full of cigar stubs; the reek of them hung over the office. Behind the table was a chair, one leg broken. It had been wired together. There was a heavy bow-back chair near the door—the kind common to bar rooms—and in the opposite corner was a substantial hall tree, finished in golden oak. There was an earthen *olla* of water on a stand. Elliot's hand shot out and swept the papers and the can of cigar stubs from the top of the table.

After that he stood there, breathing heavily. Then he picked up the hall tree and smashed it against the earthen water jug. The jug splintered into a dozen pieces and the water trickled out onto the floor.

He picked up the barroom chair then and started beating it against the top of the table. The top split and the table collapsed. It was no trick to wrench off one of the legs. With that he broke everything in the place. In a small closet he found the surveying instruments; these he also smashed.

His lips were drawn tight against his teeth now. Sweat born of rage and fatigue streamed from his body. He took the hall tree again and with it punched out the two front windows. Then he wrenched the door off its hinges. Dust seeped up from the floor and stung his nostrils. He stepped outside and found a ring of white-faced men standing there, watching him. They backed away when he came out on the sidewalk. To them he said, "My fight is with Fransen. Nobody else. You boys keep out of it."

HE RETURNED to East's saloon for two more drinks. The bartender kept licking his lips. He said, "Not in here, Rod." Elliot didn't hear him. He was listening to the footsteps coming up the street. Through the window he saw the men—twenty, perhaps. Fransen and Gib Baudry were out front. Fransen came through the door first. It was like him to do that.

Ben Fransen's thick nose seemed to hunch out from between a pair of glittering black eyes. His mouth was full and loose, eternally shaped around a heavy cigar. He came to the bar and stood beside Elliot. The bartender shoved him a glass. Fransen waved it aside and said, "Start talking, Elliot." Gib Baudry moved a step closer.

Elliot said, "I'm building a fence, Fransen. I contracted to build it. I don't take orders from the FB nor any other man. When that fence is built it will cut into your cow-stealin' and settle things down in the valley. There won't be such a turnover in land then. That won't be so good for you. Two of my men were killed yesterday. They were just Mexicans so maybe you figure you'll get away with it. I've had all I'll take from you, Fransen. I'm here to settle up. Let's get to hell at it!"

There was a quick intake of breath from the crowd. Ben Fransen moved away from the bar, his fists balled, his feet spread wide. He made a quick lunge and as he did he said, "Take him, Gib!" Elliot pivoted, turning his back on Fransen. He sank his fist wrist deep into Gib Baudry's belly.

Baudry made a gurgling sound and stepped back, blinking. He was three inches shorter than Elliot and three inches wider. His shirt was unbuttoned half way down the front exposing his gray underwear. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows. He shifted his weight now, spreading his feet. His head seemed to sink lower. His hand shot out, scooped a bottle from the bar, threw it. Elliot ducked and came boring in.

For a second they were locked there, heads against shoulders. Then Baudry's knee came up sharply, catching Rod in the stomach. Elliot lost his grip and staggered backwards, tripped and fell on his back. Fransen's big henchman came in for the kill.

Fransen was standing with both elbows on the bar now, cool and unconcerned. An amused look was on his face. He had perfect confidence in Baudry's prowess. The other men had crowded into the saloon and now stood in a circle. Regardless of what their feelings in the matter might be, this was Elliot's fight and they wouldn't step into it.

Baudry gripped the bar with his right hand. He raised his boot to tromp Elliot's face. Elliot rolled, grabbed the boot and pulled it loose. Quick as a cat he was on his feet. He threw the boot and it smashed against the side of Baudry's head, leaving a bright red patch of ripped skin.

Baudry's right hand left the bar, swung in a wide arc, and caught Elliot on the side of the face. Elliot went stumbling backwards and fell against a table. He saw Baudry coming after him. Gripping the edge of the table with both hands, he drew his knees up against his chest and kicked out with both feet. The blow caught Baudry in the chest, sprawled him back against the bar.

Elliot picked up a chair and swung it. The chair splintered against Baudry's shoulders. They stood there then, toe to toe, slugging.

Baudry missed a long, looping swing and for a second his chin was exposed. Elliot didn't miss. He saw Baudry's head snap back, saw his mouth open. Rod followed through quickly and his knuckles ripped against the exposed teeth. Baudry's tongue came out and the blood ran down both sides of his chin.

Elliot let him have it again, but the man was still a long way from gone. He started backing toward the door now, an ape of a man refusing to go down or quit. His blows were jerkier, more measured, but they had just as much power behind them.

Baudry got his hands on a chair and he swung it down in time for Rod's fist to smash against the heavy bottom. Hot shivers of pain hammered against Elliot's elbow and screamed on up into his shoulder. He gripped the rungs of the chair with both hands, leaned his weight against it. They stood there that way, rocking back and forth. Then Rod released his grip suddenly and Baudry stumbled forward. Rod sidestepped and smashed the edge of his hand against the broad back of that thick, boil-pitted neck. He heard Baudry's guttural cough of pain and, stepping back again, Rod lifted the man's head with a hard smash in the face.

Baudry started giving. He backed on through the door, across the hard-packed sidewalk and into the muddy street. He stood there, swinging wildly. Rod followed, smashing him again and again until Baudry went down on his knees, then over backwards into the mud.

Still Elliot followed him and they rolled there until those on the sidewalk could not tell which man was which until finally one stood up and walked away without ever looking back and they knew that man was Elliot.

For the first time Ben Fransen took the cigar from his mouth. He ground it out under his foot, then walked over to where Baudry lay face down in the mud. Fransen's voice was thick with disgust. He nudged Baudry over with his foot and said, "Get up, damn you, before I kick your face in."

He turned then and went back toward the saloon and on the sidewalk men split into two groups and spoke in low tones. A bunch of FB punchers swaggered onto the street as if defying anyone to get in their way. A group of townsmen stared sullenly at Elliot's retreating back. Fransen spoke loud enough for all to hear. He said, "Looks like Syndicate money can buy anything, don't it? Maybe a man sells more than his labor when he contracts to build a fence."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Syndicate Boss

ROD ELLIOT was sick. He felt like the insides had been shaken out of him; he remembered that once he had ridden an outlaw bronc and afterwards had felt something like this. But this time it was different; it was not only his guts that had been shaken loose. It was more than that.

He knew they were watching him there in front of Jim East's saloon and he couldn't let himself down yet, so he forced himself to walk straight around the corner back to where he had left the mule. He got into the saddle and rode up to Court Street, then left two blocks, and when the cottonwood at that corner hid him he dismounted and let himself go.

He kept thinking of those Mexicans who had died needlessly at the post camp, knowing he had done everything possible. There was no way of proving who had killed them, for even if anyone knew they would be afraid to say. Then he thought of Jake and Betty Cavenish, and he wondered why it was that when things got too big to handle he always thought of Betty. He always went to her, yet he had never been able to tell her how he really felt.

He rode to the white picket fence that stood half as high as the hollyhocks and went inside the yard, leaving the gate open behind him. The porch boards complained beneath his weight and the front door opened before he had a chance to knock. She said, "Come in, Rod. I've got some water heating on the stove. Take off your shirt and come in the kitchen." He didn't argue.

She was perhaps two years younger than Rod; he had never asked her. She could open her eyes wide and pout her lips when she wanted to. At such times she looked tiny and helpless, making a man want to hold her close and protect her. With her

it was a completely natural gesture, as old as womankind itself.

She kept house for her father here in town and had a man's say in the running of the small herd they kept near the head of Dry Cheyenne. During the cowboy strike in the spring of '83 she had taken her place in the saddle alongside her dad, and those who had seen her still talked about it.

Elliot said suddenly, "Old Gomez. Chico's young brother. Both dead."

She said, "Don't talk now. Wait a while."

She bathed his face without speaking to him. After that she poured him a glass of whiskey and then sat down opposite him and folded her hands in her lap. She said, "You had nothing to go on, Rod. You acted like a crazy man. Now it's started."

He said, "I'm not asking for help." He said it bitterly. "Everything I've got is tied up in this job. I took a contract to build a fence. Fransen is trying to stop me. That's all there is to it."

"It's not all there is to it, Rod. You know that. The Syndicate's got money; they can hire their killing done."

"If it means wiping out Fransen and Gib Baudry and their gang then I say let 'em hire their killers."

"A lot of innocent people will be hurt."

She meant people like her father and a dozen others. Small ranchers who had been in the Canadian Valley long before the Syndicate moved in. They were legitimate ranchers. They had no real quarrel with the Syndicate and the Syndicate had no real quarrel with them. Outside of the age-old clash of big man against little man there was none of the stuff here of which war is made. Jake Cavenish and men like him were scrupulously honest; it was hard to think of them with the same mind with which one thought of Ben Fransen and the others who had built their herds from the Syndicate cattle that drifted into the breaks away from the storm.

ROD looked at her and said, "Let them stay out of it." Yet he knew they couldn't. It would be the big men against the little men, and once the Syndicate gun machine was goaded into action it would sweep the valley clean.

Jake Cavenish came into the kitchen and hooked a chair away from the table with his foot. He sat down, leaning backwards, his thumbs thrust into his belt. A heavy, solid man, craggy-featured, bushy white hair. A man who pondered a thing a long time before speaking, then did not change his mind once he spoke. There was a bit of a Scotch burr still lingering about him. He said, "It was a mistake you made, laddie. A sorry mistake. I should never have let you leave here this morning. There'll be blood for every fence post now."

Betty Cavenish had turned her head quickly, looking first at Rod, then at her father. She had not known that Rod had been by the house earlier that morning. Now she stood there perplexed and afraid, caught between two men she loved. She said suddenly, "Rod says this is a personal fight between himself and Fransen. There's no need of others getting involved."

"Whistling in the dark," Cavenish said heavily. "Frank Kelly is telling it now that he'll back his man Rod Elliot in any move Elliot wants to make."

"Kelly is a damn dirty liar!" The words came out of Rod's throat before he had a chance to hold them back.

"Perhaps," Cavenish said.

The one word hit against Elliot's ears with the sharpness of a sixgun blast. He turned slowly, unbelieving toward the man he called his friend. He said slowly, "You believe him, Jake?"

The big Scotchman thought a long time before answering. He said, "It's his fence you're building, isn't it lad? It's Syndicate money you'll collect. Can you expect men to believe Kelly won't take sides in a thing like that? You can't play it alone, lad. You know that."

Elliot got to his feet slowly. There was no emotion in him now as he stood here, looking at this girl and her father. Outside of that strange man-loyalty to his crew these two here were the only people in the world for whom Elliot held any love. He spoke softly. "What would you have me do, Jake? Every cent I've got is tied up in that fence. I've got men depending on me for their pay. You want me to stand by and let Fransen stop me from collecting what's due me?"

"Is it the money then, Rod?" The girl's voice was barely audible.

"Perhaps it is," he said. "Maybe it's more than that. I told you the fence would mean the end of trouble in the valley.

Maybe I didn't make it clear enough. I meant I wanted it a decent place for you and me to raise our family."

He turned abruptly and left the room, realizing suddenly that he had proposed to her. For a year now he had dreamed about how he would ask her to be his wife. Now he had done it and it was not the way he had dreamed. It was almost as if he had said it was all over between them before it had started. He noticed that Jake Cavenish did not try to stop him, did not offer his hand. It was the first time Jake had not offered his hand to a man leaving his house.

He mounted his horse and rode back to Joe Krause and Tobey Robinson's Livery Stable where the Syndicate horses were kept. The man at the stable looked up and said, "Frank Kelly said you was to have the best horse in the barn."

"Tell Frank Kelly I pay for my own horses," Elliot said.

He went then to the Wright and Farnsworth store, down on the next corner. When he attempted to pay for the .44 and two boxes of shells he found that his credit again had been covered by FB. He said, "I still pay my own way." The clerk accepted the money, but grinned knowingly as if he did not believe it. Back on the street two men Elliot had known for years failed to speak when they saw him with the gun.

He remembered that here, on this corner, was where the old Dodge City trail had started. He remembered how, a few years back, every man had pitched in on a cow hunt. Now it was all changing—changing fast. Down the street was the warehouse, jammed with bales of wire and staples. The Frying Pan was already fenced, the XIT south drift fence was in. He was building the west fence for the FB's—an outfit represented by Frank Kelly and owned by people in the east never seen here in Tascosa. Some day there'd be a fence around Tascosa. He knew it and so did other level-headed townsmen. Knowing it they fenced their own land or sold at a fair price and moved on. Some day Tascosa would die.

It couldn't be stopped. There was no use fighting it; rather a man should take what he could and work out his solution in a sensible way. It wasn't the first time a land had changed; it wouldn't be the last time. The day of free grass was gone, and there could be no excuse now for a small rancher branding a stray because there wouldn't be any strays. Elliot and Jake Cavenish had talked it over time and again, and Rod had thought they knew the answer. Jake Cavenish had talked of white-face cows; Rod of building fence; there was good money in building fence.

But now Ben Fransen and his kind had upset things. They had said that the Syndicate was stealing the land—fencing off a town that could well become the capitol of the plains, cross road of the rails. Even after the railroad passed them by they clung to the argument. At first these men had welcomed the fence, for it brought new business to Tascosa and the turnover of town lots flourished. But now that was done with and they wailed of fenced-off trails strangling the town. It was high-sounding talk, designed to make men listen. Elliot knew it added up only to the fact that Ben Fransen, his real estate business lagging, saw too late that the fences would put an end to his whipping the breaks for free beef.

So Ben Fransen fought the fence, and Rod saw now it wasn't hatred of FB that motivated Fransen. In fact, if in some way FB could be of use they would find in Ben Fransen an ally. For Fransen lived to make money; when his means of money making was threatened he fought. Today he wanted the legitimate ranchers of the valley to fight with him, and out of the chaos of war Fransen would find a way to make a profit; he always had. Elliot's thoughts were interrupted rudely by the appearance of Frank Kelly.

THE FB manager was loud-mouthed and dirty. He held one of the best jobs in the Panhandle—a job that called for a good business head and a way with men. Kelly had both. Yet he did not live in his well-furnished headquarters house nor did he dress like a manager. He seemed to take pride in his appearance and his foul speech. He told often how he had beat his way to the top, punctuating the tale with blows of his fist against the bar, spicing it with obscenity.

He roared a greeting now. "Elliot! By God I been lookin' for you, man. Let's drink!"

Elliot eyed the FB boss coolly. Until now there had been nothing but business between them. Frank Kelly had said, "Build the damn fence and build it right and when it's done I'll see you get the money. Don't think I don't know what a fence is supposed to look like, damn yuh! If it ain't right I'll rip out every damn post and stand there and see you make it right. I'll stay out of your way and we'll both get along."

Elliot had liked it that way. To him, the FB Syndicate was a thing—nothing more. A thing capable of paying well.

But now Frank Kelly was seeing more than a fence-builder in Elliot. Slowly the pieces were falling into place. Rod said, "You seem mighty happy about something, Kelly."

"I like a man who don't wait for orders," Kelly boomed. "You seen how it was and you lit in with both fists swingin'. That's my kind of man. By God I'm here to tell the town that I'm backin' your fight if it means wipin' out the whole damn valley!" Then, behind his hand: "And you won't lose by it, Elliot. There's bound to be spare scraps of land left layin' around. A man's in with me he won't have no trouble runnin' a few cows."

They had moved down the street, back toward Jim East's saloon. There was quite a crowd of men on the sidewalk. Grim-faced men; men who had grubbed a living out of the land in spite of hell and high water. They saw Elliot and Kelly move down the street together and their faces became harder. Frank Kelly, half drunk, yelled out, "Get the hell out of the way, you cow-thievin' sons. Make way for a couple of men!"

It didn't seem like Elliot had raised his voice; maybe he hadn't. But every word he said was clear and there wasn't a man missed it. He said, "I'd drink with a polecat or a sheepherder, Kelly, but damned if I'm low enough to drink with you or Fransen!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Two of a Kind

JUST as Elliot had known earlier this morning that Ben Fransen would not fight with his fists, he knew now that Kelly would. So he braced himself and waited.

But the blow did not come. A mask had spread across Kelly's face. There were small patches of white at each corner of his mouth. His nostrils flared. He said, "What the hell's your game, Elliot? I thought for a minute you had some horse sense."

"I'm building a fence, Kelly," Elliot said. "I've got a contract to build it. I don't take orders from you, according to that contract. When I finish your company pays me off. If you don't like the way I'm doing it there's a clause that says you can pay me off in full right now and finish the job yourself. Do it, if you want, then try to explain to your bosses back east why you did it."

Ben Fransen had elbowed his way through the crowd to stand by the FB manager. Rod remembered thinking that in a way these two were strangely alike, even though the exact opposites in physical appearance. Where Kelly was tall, bulky, laced with muscle, Fransen was short and soft. But the cunning that lurked in Kelly's eyes was no less bright in Fransen's. The two made a dangerous team.

It was Fransen who spoke—Fransen who for three months now had cried for the blood of the FB and the other syndicates rooting into the Panhandle. "The contract also says, Elliot, that if you don't finish the fence in a satisfactory manner in a stipulated time you get nothing—regardless of how much work you put in." He looked at Kelly and added, "Or so I've heard."

Kelly expelled a long breath and unknotted his fists. He said, "Yeah, Elliot. It says that, too."

"It does," Elliot said. "But I figured you'd see to it that the fence got through. You made some high-sounding talk at that banquet we had here in town not long ago, Kelly. You had a letter from your owners telling how the FB wanted to be neighbors with the folks already in the valley. That was the night we laid out the fence line, remember? We figured it would be a good thing for all concerned. You said that night if we put in the fence you'd see there was no more fighting in the valley. Are you backing up those promises, Kelly, or are you just a damn liar?"

Kelly struck without warning. His right ripped into Rod's already battered face,

hard. Someone caught Elliot and held him up. But Kelly crashed through and landed two more blows while Rod stood there helplessly, his arms entangled in those of the man trying to help him.

Another punch struck him like a pile-driver and he knew no more until he opened his eyes in the middle of the street. He was drenched with water that did not come from the drizzling rain; there was an empty bucket standing by his head. He was rimmed in by a stockade of legs. As his eyes focused he saw four men holding Kelly.

He could see Fransen smiling, and he remembered thinking that this was exactly the way Fransen would want things. Physically ill equipped to fight his own battles, Fransen was satisfied to stand back and watch Gib Baudry do his mangling. Baudry had failed this morning; Frank Kelly hadn't.

BUT it was not enough for Kelly. The men holding him dug their heels into the street, pleaded first, then threatened. Kelly's powerful frame surged against their grasp as he tried to get to Elliot's bloody body.

Rod got to his hands and knees, shaking his head. Then he got to his feet and said, "All right men, turn him loose!"

The burring voice of Jake Cavenish, close by said, "Don't be a damn fool, laddie. That's not being brave."

Somehow that made sense in Elliot's spining mind. There'd be another time. There'd be another time for Ben Fransen and Gib Baudry. But Kelly, deprived of the use of his fists, was taking it out on his lungs. The most hardened man in Tascosa heard words he had never known existed. Twice more Elliot tried to break away to get back at Kelly, but a dozen men hustled him out and put him on his horse.

Cavenish said, "You get back to town, laddie. Get back to your fence-building. You've done more than a man's job today and we won't be forgetting it. You've made your stand clear and got us to thinking straight again. I for one will back you all the way. Go on and build your fence and if you need help you'll find you have friends in the valley."

"Thanks, Jake," Rod mumbled through swollen lips. "Thanks a hell of a lot."

They had called Frank Kelly's bluff now. A dozen times he had vowed loudly and profanely that he wanted no trouble, even when it looked like he was asking for it. When the ranchers committee had written to the owners back east they had been assured that all the FB wanted was a fence.

Elliot said, "We'll give 'em their chance now, Jake. Keep an eye on Ben Fransen and see that the boys don't drink his whiskey and listen to his poison, that's all I ask."

"Ben shouldn't be hard to handle," Jake Cavenish said. "It don't look to me like Baudry will bother anybody for a week and Ben is not one who'll be riding out fighting your fence crew on his own. If there's any free whiskey to be passed out I'll be the one who does it."

Right at this moment Rod Elliot wasn't conscious of the bruises on his body nor of the tight-drawn skin across his swollen face. His right hand, puffed to twice its size, sent back no pain when he reached down and shook with Jake Cavenish. Any beating he had taken today was worth it. Fourteen hours a day of back-breaking hell in the mud and rain was worth it. The two Mexicans out there at the post camp hadn't died in vain.

Jake Cavenish said softly, "I'd drop by and say a word to Betty if I was you. She'll be wanting to know how things worked out."

Rod tried to grin, found he couldn't, touched the edge of his hand to the brim of his hat and rode back toward the cottage with the hollyhocks and the white picket fence. And a half hour later, leaving there, it was hard for him to believe there had ever been trouble in Canadian Valley.

He kept looking from one side to the other, trying to figure out whether it was actually birds singing in the rain or just something inside him. He kept wondering now why it had taken him so damned long to ask her to marry him in the first place, then felt a hot, strange thrill run through him as he realized he'd have the rest of his life to make up for it.

He rode boldly back down Bridge Street and saw that level heads had gotten the men inside the saloons. Jake Cavenish had a persuasive way about him when he wanted to talk sense to men.

The fuse had been snipped off the powder

keg and Frank Kelly would have to put up or shut up. While he ruthlessly cut small herds and drove off cattle like a despot he had done it in the name of peace. Peace that the small ranchers so sorely needed and wanted. Now they were listening to Jake Cavenish instead of Ben Fransen. Cool thinking and common sense had settled across the town of Tascosa.

Rod crossed the bridge and headed back up the river, anxious to get back to Stuffy and Galt and his two Mexicans. He realized then that some day, when it was all over, Chico, with his double-barreled shotgun, would find the man who had killed his brother; Morales would find the man who had killed Gomez. There would be the whisper of a knife in a dark alley, some day.

But that was the law of the land and that is the way it would have to be. An eye for an eye. Some day, Rod Elliot knew, he and Ben Fransen and Gib Baudry would have to settle scores. At the moment that seemed a long way off.

He heard the sound of two horses then. The sharp instinct of months of trouble made him rein off the trail into a hackberry thicket there by the river. Water, from the week's drench of rain, slipped from the leaves and seeped down the neck of his shirt. He patted the horse's shoulder, holding it still so that it's feet would not make the sucking sound in the ooze.

Carefully parting the branches he saw the two riders coming up the trail, saw them swing off in the direction of the FB. For a long time he sat there watching them, and all of the peace and contentment and well-being drained out of him and in its place came the icy grip of trouble he had come to know so well.

Riding side by side were Kelly and Fransen.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### "Stay Out of Tascosa!"

IT STARTED raining again an hour before sundown; rolling, drenching squalls that moved across the plains dumping their tons of water, rumbling on northward. By the time Rod got back to the post camp he was soaked to the hide. He couldn't see any light nor sign of a fire under the shed they had built. It worried him. Then a voice close by, and soft, said, "Hold up a minute, pardner. Let's take a look at you."

Elliot let the air *whoosh* out of his lungs. He said, "It's me, Stuffy."

The puncher materialized out of the darkness. He had a cocked six-shooter in his right hand. He let the hammer down easily and dropped the gun into its holster. He started talking, then, just as if there had never been an interruption in the conversation of two days previous. He said, "The let-up in the rain gives us a chance to get most of the posts up on the bank. We worked on that all day. We didn't try to haul none out on the fence line."

"I appreciate it like hell, Stuffy," Elliot said.

The puncher turned his back and over his shoulder said, "It's a job, ain't it?"

They weren't men you could go around praising and slapping on the back. A month ago Rod had to knock the head half off this man to get him to take orders. Since then there had been no question. He had come to appreciate them and he had come to feel real responsibility toward them. They were men who said nothing of their past and made no plans for the future, but they were men a man could count on in a fight.

Chico, Morales and Galt were rolled in their blankets under one of the wagons. They had dug a trench around themselves to try to keep off some of the water. Rod knew that all three were awake, watching him, but they didn't make a move. They knew how to save their energy until needed.

The next morning at a breakfast of cold biscuits and coffee they didn't ask for information; they waited until Rod told them. He tried to keep his voice light, make it sound as though their worries were over. But the nagging puzzle of Ben Fransen and Frank Kelly riding off toward the FB together had robbed him of another night's sleep. When men like Fransen and Kelly got together they got together for business reasons. And business with them meant trouble.

Finally Galt looked up from his coffee, a sympathetic grin on his face. He said, "You make it sound pretty as hell, boss. All that talk about how we'll raise hell in town for a week when the job's done and all. Why don't you believe it?"

Rod didn't have a chance to answer. Four riders had come up the FB side of the fence and dismounted three hundred yards away. They looked as if they planned on making camp there. Rod waited until he was sure they weren't coming any farther, then he strapped on his gun and went over to see what it was all about. Somehow, without being obvious, Galt fell in beside him. They looked as if they were merely checking the fence that had already been strung.

A SHORT, hammered-down, bow-legged man came down the FB side of the fence to meet them. When he was fifteen feet away from Rod he stopped, leaned against one of the fence posts and under the shield of his broad-brimmed hat built himself a cigarette. He was not looking at Rod Elliot. He was staring solidly at Galt.

Galt said, "Hello, Rock. Still hiring your gun out for cash money?"

The man called Rock licked his cigarette, twisted the end of it, placed it carefully in his mouth and said, "Yeah. How about you, Galt?"

"I got a job building fence," Galt said. "Any objection?"

"None. As long as you keep building fence. This jigger with you Rod Elliot?"

"That's him," Galt said.

"Me and my boys there work for Frank Kelly," the man called Rock said, jerking his thumb toward the three who stood with hands on guns. "Kelly says you made some big talk about finishing this fence. We're here to see you do it. You need any supplies or grub we'll see that it's brought out to you. You stay the hell out of Tascosa." He turned around deliberately and walked back to where the three gun-hawks were waiting.

Rod started to take a step forward and Galt laid a hand on his arm. "Leave him alone," Galt warned softly. "Him and them three with him are bad medicine. I knew 'em once over in New Mexico. Play it easy and see what they're up to."

The swift anger passed out of Rod quickly as he realized the sense in Galt's warning. The gunmen were on FB property and had every right to be there. This was no time to start a needless killing. He held himself a minute, waiting until the knot untied in the pit of his stomach, then said softly, "What the hell do you suppose that means?"

Galt shrugged. He said, "Maybe they just want to see your friend Fransen don't bother you no more."

"Maybe," Rod said.

They turned and went back to where Chico, Morales and Stuffy were waiting. He still hadn't told them about seeing Fransen and Frank Kelly together. Some kind of a play was shaping up here that he couldn't quite catch. It kept gnawing at him, making him edgy, and when he saw the dozen riders sloping in from the direction of Tascosa he found his hand going to his six-shooter first, his thoughts coming later. When the riders were close enough he recognized Jake Cavenish and friends of his from the valley.

Rod had a weak grin on his face when the men reined into the post camp. He said, "You should have sent word you was comin' out for a visit, Jake. I might have mistook you for buzzards and taken a shot at you."

Jake Cavenish grinned. "I told you yesterday I was willing to back you up in keeping things peaceful. Me and the boys here talked it over and they see it the same way as I do. We figgered you was shorthanded and could maybe use a little help. You show us what to do and we'll get at it. Seein' as how we're gonna use one side of the damn thing, I reckon our help won't cost you nothin'. Call it sort of a weddin' present if you want."

Again, momentarily, Elliot felt that sweep of well-being go through him. But when he had lined out the men and given them jobs to do he couldn't keep his eyes away from the four FB gunhawks who kept always just out of six-shooter range, hunkered there in the rain smoking and drinking coffee.

He kept still about seeing Kelly and Fransen together until the men came in for their noon meal. Then, getting Jack Cavenish to one side, he said, "You see Fransen before you left town?"

"No," Cavenish said slowly, sensing trouble. "Gib's up and around looking like somebody run him through a meat grinder. Makin' a lot of talk about how you hit him over the head with a chair and what he's gonna do to you the next time he sees you."

"I saw Fransen and Kelly riding off toward the FB together. This morning those four guns over there moved in. Said they wanted to see we didn't have no more trouble. I don't like so damn many people anxious to keep me out of trouble all of a sudden."

"Maybe you just got nerves," Jake Cavenish said. He didn't sound very convincing.

Someone from over near the fire yelled, "Damn it, Elliot, is this the best grub you got? These biscuits got worms in 'em!"

"That's the reason he wants to marry my daughter," Jake Cavenish said good-naturedly. "Wants to feed his own gut and let me start eatin' wormy biscuits."

Rod took the joshing that followed and when the complaints against the meager food supply grew too loud Jake Cavenish said, "Take a half hitch in your belts, set some fence posts this afternoon and quit your yappin' and I'll see you get fed tonight. My daughter's bringin' a chuck wagon out from town with some decent grub in it."

He saw the flush of pleasure cross Rod Elliot's face, chucked him in the ribs with his thumb and said, "Don't be gettin' fat-headed, laddie. It's her father's well being she's thinkin' about. Not yours."

That may have been so, but the glow of knowing that he was going to see Betty again today, and that she would be around to do the cooking, was enough to keep Elliot walking on air. The posts streamed up out of the canyon floor; the two wagons hauled them out to the end of the ever-growing fence line. Wire was strung and hammers thudded staples into soggy posts. He had nearly forgotten his worry over Fransen and Kelly when he glanced over toward where the four FB gunmen had sat all day playing cards under a rigged-up tarp. One of them was gone and again he got that uneasy feeling in his stomach. A half hour later they heard the shot.

THOSE who had heard it dropped their tools and stood silent. Galt and Stuffy appeared from nowhere and took their place alongside Rod Elliot. Jake's face grew suddenly older. Rod said, "What time you figger Betty's due, Jake?"

Jake shook his head. "Not for a couple of hours yet. She couldn't make much time with the wagon. The thing is pretty heavy."

Rod spoke to Stuffy and Galt. "Let's go have a look-see. Maybe somebody just shot at a jackrabbit."

"Yeah," Galt said flatly.

They mounted horses and rode up the fence line toward the Tascosa trail. When they came abreast the three FB gunmen the man called Rock got up slowly and said, "Goin' some place, Elliot?"

"Just lookin' around," Rod Elliot said softly. "Thought we heard a shot."

"That so?" Rock said, spitting out his cigarette. "Funny. I didn't hear nothing. Maybe you better get back to buildin' fence and forget it."

Rod Elliot's voice was low in his throat. He said, "I told you we're looking around."

It was Galt who said, "Yeah, that's what he told yuh."

From the tail of his eye Rod saw that both Galt and Stuffy had six-shooters in their hands. He took the interval to draw his own gun. Rock said, "Still handy with that thing, ain't you, Galt?"

"Yeah," Galt said, grinning. "You and me was gonna have a contest some time, remember?"

"I'll wait until you ain't got a head start," Rock said.

"Do that, Rock. We're gonna scout around a little. We thought we heard a shot."

Rock shrugged. "What the hell?" he said. "Kelly said I was to keep you away from Tascosa. Long as you ain't goin' there I guess it will be all right. And you ain't goin' there. That's a long ways and you couldn't keep me covered all the time."

"Yeah, that's right Rock," Galt said. "You're too damn handy at bein' a dry-gulcher."

"Glad you remember," Rock said.

They rode on, Galt and Stuffy keeping back, their guns trained on Rock and his men until they were out of six-shooter range. Then they spurred up alongside Rod Elliot. "You seem to know him right well," Rod said.

"Yeah." It was the only answer Galt offered.

They took the Tascosa trail and rode slowly. "There's one man missing," Rod reminded. "Maybe that's why Rock was so easy on letting us go. I'll feel better when we're out in the open more."

"Maybe we've gone far enough," Stuffy said flatly. "Look there at the side of the trail."

They reined up and Rod saw the dead man sprawled out in the mud. He had been shot through the back of the head. At a little distance his horse stood, head drooped against the drizzling rain. They dismounted. Rod turned the dead man over on his back. For a long time he just stood there, staring into the sightless eyes. After a while Galt said, "You know him?"

"Yes," Rod said. "I know him. He's the banker in at Tascosa."

"He was in a hell of a hurry to get some place," Stuffy said, running his hand across the sweat-caked hip of the riderless horse.

"And somebody was damn anxious he didn't get there," Rod said grimly, looking at where the bullet had torn out through the top of the banker's head.

"You're smart as hell, ain't yuh?" a voice said softly.

The three men turned and stared into the barrel of a .30-30 rifle gripped tightly in the hands of Rock's missing FB gunman.

## CHAPTER SIX

### War

ROD ELLIOT muffled the instinct to make a try for his gun, forced his muscles to relax and drawled, "What's the matter? Wouldn't the banker make you a loan?"

"Have a good time, funny boy," the gunman said, the expression on his face never changing. "Which one's Elliot?"

"I'm popular as hell," Rod said dryly. "Want my coffin measurements?"

The gunman shook his head slightly. "I just hired on to kill you, not bury you."

It seemed to Rod that the man was listening, and in seconds Rock and his three henchmen rode through the thicket and out onto the trail. Rock had that perpetual grin on his face. He said, "You didn't go far."

"Far enough to see you all in hell," Rod Elliot said. "We still call shootin' a man in the back of the head murder hereabouts. Frank Kelly hasn't been able to change that."

"It's murder when somebody tells about it," Rock corrected. One of the men had dismounted and was coming forward to relieve the men of their guns. Rock said, "That short-set, ugly one—let him keep his. Him and me got a bet on."

"Thanks for nothin'," Galt said flatly.

A dozen and one thoughts raced through Rod Elliot's mind. These men were hired killers, completely impersonal. There seemed to be no possible opening. He said, "Mind if I smoke, Rock?"

Rock waited until his man had stepped in from behind, unbuckled Rod's gun belt and let it drop to the ground. Then he said, "Why not? Maybe you'll have a lot of smokin' to do where you're goin'."

Rod made the cigarette and was surprised at the steadiness of his hands. While licking the paper he stole a glance at Stuffy and Galt. Stuffy was sucking thoughtfully on a tooth, as unconcerned as if he had been watching a card game. Except for the tenseness of the muscles along Galt's jaw there was little indication of emotion in the man. He seemed ready for any move Rock might make, even though he knew his case was hopeless, satisfied as long as he was going to have a chance to go down shooting.

Rod's hand started toward his shirt pocket for a match and a gun smacked against his spine. He stood frozen for a second, then said, "I usually light my cigarettes before I smoke 'em."

Rock laughed. A short hard laugh. "Go ahead," he said.

Rod drew the smoke deeply into his lungs, glanced up at Rock and said, "Mind telling me what the hell it's all about before you gut shoot me?"

The gunman shrugged. "How the hell do I know?" he said. "I don't ask questions. When Fransen and Kelly get to hell ask them."

"I meant the banker here," Rod said, keeping his voice emotionless. "Who the hell did he cross up?"

"Ask him," Rock suggested. "Maybe he should have stayed in his bank. How do you want it? In the back or in the guts? That don't go for you, Galt. I want to see you try to get that slick gun out after you got a couple of slugs in yuh. It's been a long time."

"You ain't changed none, Rock," Galt said.

The others were off their horses now. They had drawn their guns and cocked

them. They were all moving forward.

The tall skinny one with splotches of freckles on his hands picked Rod for a target. They moved around in a straight line closer to the bushes, making a mock ceremony out of it.

The skinny man lined his gun on Rod's middle. Rod felt the perspiration standing out on his upper lip, running off his forehead. The man with the gun grinned. Then suddenly, without warning, he took a step forward, arching his back awkwardly. He seemed to fumble with the gun, then his fingers stiffened and the weapon dropped to the ground. He started to curse and a bloody froth bubbled across his lips. He took two more steps, fell, twisted grotesquely, one hand going toward his back. There was a knife sticking between his shoulder blades.

Before there was another move a shotgun blasted twice. Two of Rock's men seemed to rise out of their tracks, blown half in two by the load of buckshot. In that split second Galt moved for his gun.

The first of Galt's bullets thudded into the pommel of Rock's saddle. Rock threw himself to one side, his gun spurting death and Rod saw Galt go down, rolling. On the other side of him Stuffy fired once. Rock's gun blazed again, and then Galt had him in his sights. He shot twice more. The last shot caught Rock as he was falling out of the saddle.

Morales came out of the bushes first, his white teeth exposed in a hideous grin, a knife gripped in his hand. They heard the *click* of a shotgun breaking, then Chico pushed his way through the brush, shoving two new shells into his weapon. The little Mexican grinned and said, "When we see these hombres come this way we theenk we better follow. That's good for you, no?"

Rod Elliot could have sworn there were tears stinging his eyes as he scooped up his gunbelt and buckled it around his middle. He took a swift look at Galt then, saw that it was only a hip wound, not too bad. He and Stuffy lifted Galt into his saddle, then Rod was barking orders.

"I'm going on to Tascosa," he said. "Chico, you come along with me. Stuffy, you and Morales get Galt back to camp. Tell the men to follow me on in. Tell Cavenish I don't know for sure what's up but it looks like all hell's busted loose in the valley." He sank his spurs then and the horse streaked out across the soggy trail. He knew Chico was not far behind him.

The fear in him grew as he headed back toward town. The impatience in him was a thing he couldn't put off, so he took the trail that headed toward Trujillo's, the ranch farthest out toward the western breaks. He found the shack a shambles and Trujillo dead there in the front yard, his hand still gripping an old .44-40 he had never had a chance to fire.

He ran through the deserted shack like a crazy man, calling for Trujillo's wife and getting no answer. Then out by the barn, wedged between a water barrel and the harness shed, he found her. She was crazy with fear and hysteria and he had to splash water on her, slap her face to get her to talk. She poured out an unending stream of Spanish, too fast for Rod to catch. Chico said, "She say twenty men was here. They gonna wreck every place in the valley. She say Frank Kelly and Gib Baudry with them."

A thousand thoughts raced through Rod Elliot's mind. Practically every able-bodied man in the valley had ridden out to help him build a fence. There'd be no one but old men and women protecting the places. He said, "Chico, get across the river and try to warn the people on the north side. Get the women and kids back in a canyon. Someplace, anyplace. I'm gonna try to catch up with Frank Kelly."

"Boss! You can't do everything by yourself!"

"I'll sure as hell try," said Rod Elliot.

THE trail wasn't hard to follow. They had made no effort to cover it. They were heading straight down the valley toward the Baker place. From there it was only a mile or so over to Kutner's, then across the creek to Belton's. He was cursing like a madman, all sense and reason gone from him, when he topped a small rise and saw the massed band a mile ahead. Then he saw something else that curdled his blood. Bouncing across the flat plain was the unmistakable form of the Cavenish chuck wagon.

Apparently Betty saw the band of riders and mistook them for the valley ranchers who had gone out to help with the fence. for she turned the wagon that way. He

yelled until his throat was raw. Yelled senselessly, because she couldn't possibly hear him. Then she saw her mistake and turned the wagon. He saw her stand up and start lashing the mules. One man cut out from the band and started toward her. It looked like Gib Baudry.

Elliot's six-shooter was useless at that range and he had to fight himself to keep from throwing it away in his sheer desperation. He spurred the horse until blood ran down its side, racing that single rider toward the chuck wagon, still screaming her name at the top of his lungs until nothing but hoarse croaks came out of his throat.

He snatched off his hat then, waved it like a madman, until finally the wagon turned and headed his way. He'd get there before the rider made it. He could tell for sure now that it was Baudry.

He kept on at that break-neck pace and the distance between himself and the wagon shortened until he could see her standing, sawing on the lines, flailing the whip, her face chalk white, her eyes wide. He stood up in the stirrups, reined in as closely as he dared, and she knew what was expected of her. As he came alongside she jumped. His arm caught her, the weight nearly dragging him from the saddle. She had missed.

For seconds they struggled, then her hands found the cantle and he pulled her up behind him. As he did a shot cracked out and the horse stumbled. Rod kicked his feet free of the stirrups, pushed himself to one side, held her with both arms as they slid from the saddle, his own body breaking her fall. He was dazed, the wind knocked out of him. He stood up, weaving unsteadily. Another shot and mud spouted a foot ahead of him.

He pushed her down behind the dead horse, drew his gun and ran to one side, drawing Baudry's fire. Baudry was close now, fighting his horse to a stop. His face was battered into a swollen, pulpy mass, distorted more by hatred. He fired twice, but the fractious horse would not settle down and the shots went wild.

Rod's first shot knocked Baudry out of the saddle but didn't down him completely. The horse backed away as if tied to a calf and Baudry fired once under the animal's belly. The horse reared and Rod triggered. Baudry went to his knees, his lips spouting curses and blood. His gun tilted and he fired, missing by a yard. Rod's next shot sent Baudry sprawling over backwards and he stayed that way, his knees still on the ground, looking as if his back were broken.

Betty was deathly calm when she came and threw herself into Rod Elliot's arms. He said, "Your dad and the others. They're all right. I sent word to them. Looks like the whole valley has gone crazy."

"Ben Fransen has been over at the bank all day," she told him. "Mr. Wygant came and told me. Fransen has been buying up every mortgage in the valley. Nobody knows where he got the money. Mr. Wygant couldn't refuse to sell. He didn't know what to do. I told him he'd better go tell dad."

"Never mind that now," Rod Elliot said. "You stay put right here and you'll be all right. Somebody will come and get you as soon as it's safe."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him hard on the lips. She didn't say anything. He caught up Gib Baudry's horse, mounted and rode in the direction the band had taken.

He could see how it was now, and he cursed himself for not having seen the possibility and blocked it in some way. When Tascosa had started to die, Wygant, the banker, had been caught with a safe full of mortgages and little money in the till. It was only straight loyalty that had prevented a run on his bank long before this. Now Fransen had come with an offer to buy up those mortgages—probably at straight face value—and Wygant hadn't been able to refuse. It was no mystery to Elliot where Fransen had suddenly got his money nor was it any longer a mystery why Fransen had ridden to the FB with Frank Kelly. With those mortgages in their possession the last block to possession of the Canadian Valley was removed. Legal investigations, law suits, or rightful heirs wouldn't have a leg to stand on. The biggest land grab to ever hit Texas was exploding right under his nose.

HE CAUGHT up with them at the Baker place and it sickened him to see the blood lust of this crew. They rode like a band of Apaches, firing at anything and everything. He saw a chicken cut across the barnyard, saw a man fire and saw the

chicken tumble end over end. A dog went yelping out from the barn and a shot caught it and rolled it. Ruthless destruction by power-crazy men who had been promised a slice of an empire. He sought out Frank Kelly, found him, then yelled in his hoarse cracking voice, "All right, Kelly? You got guts enough to make this man to man?"

There was no hesitation on the part of the FB manager. He wheeled his horse and came charging in, his guns spewing death. Rod felt lead sear across his ribs, knocking him half out of the saddle. Then he had his sights lined on that massive chest and was working the trigger. He didn't have a chance to see Kelly go down, for a dozen riders had closed in around him.

Something hit him. He clutched at the saddle horn, barely managing to hang onto his six-shooter. Something smashed against his arm and he went out of the saddle. Hoofs cut the mud around his face. He lay there, not daring to move. Then he heard the sound of new guns, the wild yell of men, and he knew that Jake Cavenish and the ranchers had got here in time.

There was a wild welter of slaughter then; bullets at first and then men clubbing men with guns. Through the tangle he saw Ben Fransen fighting his way to get out of it, trying to make a break. Rod tried to get to his feet and he saw Fransen claw at his face, then bend double. A gun-butt came down and caught the real estate man on the back of the head. A welter of men blurred the vision; horses reared and plunged. When the space was clear Rod could see a shapeless, broken mass there in the mud.

Belly-close shots now that smelled up the air with the stench of burning cloth and seared flesh. Screams and curses. Rod tried to get into it, found that he couldn't make it, and he gradually edged his way out of danger and lay there against the side of a shed, panting, trying to stop the blood that streamed down the side of his face and soaked his left arm.

From here he could see out across the plain and he saw a single rider coming in from the side. He lined his gun that way, then saw that it was Chico. The little Mexican was hatless, riding like a madman, the double-barreled shotgun gripped in both hands, the reins in his teeth. He busted straight into the middle of things but held his fire. He seemed to be searching for one single person. Finally he found him.

It was a pock-marked, sweat-stained man with no front teeth. Rod remembered him as one of Ben Fransen's handy men. He could hear Chico's yell clearly. "You keel my baby brother! Mrs. Trujillo tell me!"

The toothless one turned, caught by surprise. He spun his gun around and yelled, "You Mexican post hole-diggin' son—"

He never finished it. A blast of buckshot tore his head half off his big shoulders.


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Rod fought hard to see the rest of it, but for him it was a losing fight. Finally he realized there wasn't much more to see anyway. He closed his eyes and the sounds kept rolling and rolling and finally they were gone. . . .

ROD was conscious of Betty's sobbing, and it sounded like the sweetest music he had ever heard in his life.

He felt sort of left out of things when he finally got propped up and found Jake Cavenish and the others clustered around him. Galt was there, his trouser leg ripped open and his thigh swathed in bandages. He and Stuffy and Chico and Morales kept back to one side as if feeling they weren't a part of things. He called to them and felt better when they came and stood by him.

Chico grinned sheepishly and said, "I get plenty mad, I theenk. The one weeth the no teeth he brag to Trujillo about how he shoot my baby brother. Mrs. Trujillo she tell me. He make a mistake to do that."

Morales spoke in Spanish. Chico dug his toe in the ground and said, "Morales say he don't know for sure if he got the one who keel Gomez. He want to know if you think Gomez don't care."

Rod swallowed against a lump in his throat. These two men who moments before had been uncontrollable killers were now like a pair of six-year-old children. He said, "I think Gomez is going to be mighty proud of you, Morales."

Back in town they got off a telegram to Cheyenne, telling what they could of the fight and asking the FB owners to come out to Tascosa. Several men went out to the FB to keep an eye on things until the owners arrived.

Turnbell and Bellingham, the two owners, were hard-headed business men with little time for sentiment. They had never given Frank Kelly authority to buy up more land and if he had money to do it he must have picked it up by juggling the FB book count. The FB owners were satisfied with the land they had, and it left it pretty clear that Kelly and Fransen had worked out the land-grab deal on their own—separately at first, then together.

Turnbell, a big florid face man who seemed to be eternally speaking through a cloud of cigar smoke, stared hard at Rod Elliott and said, "Seems to me, young fellow, like you were doing your best to live up to your contract. That fence is all we want and it's all we ever did want. Go ahead and finish it and you'll be paid off according to the contract, even though you're over the time limit. Get it through in another thirty days and there'll be a bonus for you. Guess that's about all."

He started to leave then but his partner, Bellingham, stopped him, talked to him for a few seconds out of the side of his mouth. Turnbell spoke to Jake Cavenish. He said, "We've got to put a new manager on the FB. As a gesture of friendship my partner here suggests it would be a good idea if we tried to pick a local man. You got any suggestions, Mr. Cavenish?"

Jake's eyes twinkled brightly. He said, "Would you gentlemen think me prejudiced if I suggested my own son-in-law?"

"We were hoping you'd say that, Mr. Cavenish," Bellingham said.

Rod Elliot squirmed uneasily and Betty squeezed his arm, unable to conceal the excitement that was in her. With Tascosa dying it would be one of the best jobs in the Panhandle. Rod looked over toward Jim East's saloon. He saw Stuffy and Galt saddling horses. Chico and Morales were standing there, saying nothing. Rod said, "If I take that job does it mean I have a free hand in hiring anybody I want?"

"Within reason, yes," Bellingham said.

"Then it's a deal," Elliot said.

He couldn't wait to talk with Stuffy and Galt and the two Mexican's about it. Galt set himself up as spokesman. He said, "You been a white man, Elliot, and we appreciate it. But speaking for myself there's spots in my back trail that ain't too clean, maybe. I wiped out some of it when I got Rock, but someday there might be others."

"Suppose I tell you I don't give a damn?" Elliot said.

He saw the flicker of emotion cross Galt's eyes. Then the ex-gun-slinger offered his hand. "If you said that I'd believe you," he said softly.

"Then let's say that the reorganized FB is starting out with a new manager and four of the best damn hands that ever set a saddle," Elliot said.

THE END

# ★ The Branding Corral ★

## Conducted by Strawboss

BEN SPRAGUE, of Cleveland, Ohio, writes *The Branding Corral,* hoping somebody can tell him what finally happened to the notorious Calamity Jane. There's several versions but to each there's an oldtimer who'll retort, "That ain't the way I heered it!" Here's Ben's letter.

Dear Strawboss:

A lot of information has been floating around for the last twenty-five years about Calamity Jane but as yet I've been unable to learn how she died. She returned to Deadwood a middle-aged woman with her seven-year-old daughter. She seemed to want, more than anything else, to give the child an education and a chance to grow to womanhood far away from the influences that had twisted her own life. The man Calamity loved, Wild Bill Hickok, was dead, and buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery when Calamity came back to the town in which she had formerly been a fabulous figure. This didn't make her any happier. She told the few intimate friends that she had that she wanted to put her daughter in a school, but was flat broke. Deadwood, which evidently had a heart as big as a house under its hard-bitten, brash exterior, rigged up a benefit for Calamity. The benefit took place in a saloon called the Green Front, a dive in the not-so-good section of town. The performance was successful and the proprietor of the place turned the proceeds over to Calamity—enough to put her child in the best preparatory school in the country. Everything seemed okay—until Calamity took a shot of whiskey. Then she bought drinks for the house—and the child's education was shot to hell, then and there. Jane spent practically all the money, got roaring drunk and wandered up and down Deadwood's main street until dawn. She quit the town the same day, after sobering up, taking the little girl with her. Some people say she was never seen in Deadwood again. Others say that she returned to town alone, to die in a mining camp named Terry located in the mountains surrounding Deadwood. Did she or didn't she?

*Vigilante Knifeman*

The hangrope wasn't always used to dispense Frontier justice in the wild and woolly days. A few lines from Norman A. Smith, of Nebraska, explains.

Dear Strawboss:

A smart-aleck half-Mexican, half-Negro named Ben Hodges was one of the many characters who lived on the borderline of the law in old Dodge City, Kansas. On many occasions the law nearly had him nailed down, but the smooth-talking, witty Ben proved as slippery as an eel and managed to get out from under. Men who knew held that it was Hodge's habit to rustle stock and move the animals to an isolated canyon and keep them there until the owner posted a reward for the return of his beef. Hodges then found the critters and pulled down the reward. At last, however, Hodges fell into it, head-first. A posse of Dodge cattlemen, following reports that Ben would be found with the goods this time, traced him to his private canyon and captured him. In his heart, each member of the posse knew Hodges was guilty. His bad record was against him. But though the possemen had Hodges, they had no cattle. The canyon was empty. Wiser heads prevailed against those who said Hodges ought to be hung on general principles. But the leaders argued that Hodges was morally guilty, anyhow. They decided against hanging him. Instead, they crippled him for life—they cut through the tendons of each of Hodge's heels. Until the day of his death, many years later, Ben hobbled about Dodge on his maimed legs. He never appeared in court after that. In fact, it was the lesson of his life.

—STRAWBOSS

# BLAST DOWN THOSE PRAIRIE PIRATES!

**By Harry F. Olmsted**

**Gripping Saga of a One-Man Vengeance Army**

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**Gripping Saga of a One-Man Vengeance Army**

**The memory of a crude headboard on the Shakaska, under which slept nine brave murdered boys, relentlessly drove Duke Brackett on his lonely, never-ending mission. He hunted, not a man, but a voice. A voice which, when he at long last heard it, would be calling Brackett, himself, to his grave, with the grim, sad bushwhacker's battle call: "God giveth and God taketh away!"**

**The gun rose and fell, smashing against the old man's skull**

## CHAPTER ONE

**Death in the Blackjacks**

THE afternoon sun hung low when Duke Brackett splashed across the ford, turned right along the bluff and dismounted before the rude cross lifting above the sunflowers. That cross was scorched about the edges, for it had been fashioned from the bed of a half-burned chuck wagon. It sagged wearily, as if already tired of its vigil over the graves of the nine cowboys who slept in the earth beneath.

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Duke stood there, hat in one hand, the other thrown across the

neck of his pony. He was a tall man, too gaunt now for his clothes, his stubbled cheeks pinched, his eyes sunken. Pallor rode him oddly. His colorless lips moved as he read the words on the cross, burned there with a running iron.

DIED HERE
NINE TEXANS
PINE TREE ROAD IRON
KILLED BY PARTIES UNKNOWN
REST IN PEACE

Memories seethed in Duke's mind. Again he saw those fierce storms along the Trail. Lightning, thunder, rain, mud. Three thousand wild longhorns from the Pah Cut Hills, made so boogery they'd spook at the snort of a horse. Undiluted hell fording the Red, the Canadian, the Cimarron and the Salt Fork. No rest, night or day, for an eleven man crew.

On the Shakaska, twenty miles west of the Kaw Agency, they were halted by a rag-tag band of Indians who demanded twenty beeves—the price of going through. The red men were dirty, mean, arrogant. Duke ran them off with drawn six-shooter. A few nights later, well out of the Nations, the Texans had water, good grass and clear skies. The men slept. God, how they slept.

Agony lived again in Duke's eyes as he recalled the awakening. Crackling guns. Blood-chilling whoops. The shrilling of the remuda held in the rope stockade. Cursing of the sleep-drugged trail crew as they fought and died. Brackett fought on his knees, emptying his six-shooter at the flashing, mounted forms. Reloading and firing again. There sounded the thunder of stampeding cattle as he fell to earth.

The whole thing lasted only minutes, yet those minutes were alive with impressions he would carry to his grave. The calming orders of Old Limpy Kells, who had been up the Trail three times, first with Shanghai Pierce. The courage of those beardless, untested kids who fought, knowing they were doomed, until they dropped. Duke's brother, Billy, running to stand over him when he fell, his sixgun blazing defiance. Billy had been only fifteen.

Duke would never forget those things. Nor his agony when he awoke tied to a horse, every step of which seemed to tear the soul from his bullet-ripped body. He had been picked up at the scene of the attack by a Cartright Trail outfit. Only he and Old Limpy Kells had shown any signs of life. Both had been loaded on horses and taken along. Limpy had died that first day and they had buried him alongside the Trail. Duke hung on and was handed over to a medico in Ellsworth. It had been nip and go that first week. A month in bed, chafing to hit the saddle again. And now. . . .

Duke caressed the scar at his hat line, where a bullet had come within a fraction of letting out his brains. He sighed, tried to smile and to imagine grinning Billy Brackett, so full of life and the devil, lying cold and stiff beneath the prairie sod. And those other brave youngsters—all from neighboring outfits along the Toyah, the Pine and the Cedar. Boys whose dads had consigned cattle to Duke's drive to Kansas railhead. What can I say to them? he thought. Or to friends, who continually talked against making the gamble. How can I ever comfort Mother, who saw the sun rising and setting in Billy?

He hunkered down to smoke, conscious of the weakness still lingering in his body, and to toy with thoughts of the future. He had written home. By now, they knew . . . or soon would. If Duke had had nothing better to do, he could not have brought himself to go home and face the horror of his mother's grief, his dad's condemnation, the bitter judgment of neighbors who had lost cattle and sons. He had something better to do, something bigger and just as heartbreaking. He had to find the outfit that had done this and pay off. . . .

Those had been Injuns who had stopped the herd in the Nations and been choused away by youngsters spoiling for a fight. In the heat of battle, Limpy Kells had believed the attack was by those vindictive hostiles. So had Duke, in spite of the fact that the Indians had been ragged, poorly mounted, armed with lances, bows and arrows. The raiders had been on swift horses, armed with guns. Moreover Duke had seen the big, broad-faced leader of the trail wolves—a man with long blond or gray hair falling to his thick shoulders. A man who bawled like an angry bull, and always the same words:

"God giveth and God taketh away."

Over and over as he led his killers into and over the desperately battling Pine Tree men. "God giveth. . . ."

DUKE seemed to hear that heavy voice now, echoing through the dusk. The bitter, hateful words were real in his senses and he realized he was reading them, not hearing them. "God giveth and God taketh away." Somebody had scrawled the sermon of doom across the horizontal arm of the cross standing above the nine graves. Somebody had pumped .45 slugs through the pitiful, scorched symbol honoring the dead.

Duke gave an ugly chuckle. The killing raider had returned after disposing of his loot at Ellsworth. As soon as Duke had found his feet, he had made inquiry of the railroad people. The Pine Tree cattle had been sold to Kansas City buyers by a man named Belltower Jones, agent for a Texas outfit known as the Jeff Davis Pool. The description of Jones tallied perfectly with the picture Duke carried in his mind. A thick-set, brutal-visaged man of two hundred pounds, wearing long white hair as devoid of pigment as were his pinkish eyes.

Thoughts of that killer now, and the problem of finding him, brought something else to Duke's mind. He recalled his last word with Limpy Kells. Tied to their horses, swathed in the crude bandages fashioned by the sympathetic Cartright hands, Duke in his agony had been envious of Limpy, unconscious in the saddle. But suddenly the form of the old Indian fighter, Texas ranger and trail hand had stiffened. He came out of the fog all at once, turning fever-glazed eyes and a wry smile on Duke.

"You all right, son?" he asked in a whisper.

"Still rattlin', Limpy. You?"

"Bin shot up before, younker, an' know the feelin'." He tried to twist in the saddle, couldn't make it. "Herd's movin' right along, ain't it? Rest of the boys come out all right?"

"All dead, Limpy. You and me, we're the last."

The old-timer's jaw sagged. "No? Sorry to hear that. Throw the beeves into some other road iron, did yuh?"

"They took the herd, Limpy. The Cartright boys came along, buried our dead an' they're taking us to Ellsworth for patching. When we're fit to ride again, you an' me, we're going after that holy-howlin' gent with the bull voice. And we'll damn well find him!"

Limpy shook his head. "Not me, son. I can't wait fer Ellsworth. I'm headin' yonderly." He grew studiously grave. "Somewhere I've crossed that bull-bellerin' hombre's trail, Duke. Wisht I could think, but there's a buzzin' in my head. Can't remember. Somewhere along the Border, seems like. Somebody I tangled with when I was rangerin'. Some feller that throws the Bible at a man before he throws a gun. . . ."

"Somebody with long white hair down his shoulders?"

Limpy's eyes closed and he lolled again. "Damn this poundin' head. I dunno. But look along the Border, son. If you git hard pressed, look up a friend uh mine in the Chinatis. Name uh Crain, Chinati Crain. Tell him I said to help you find that murderin' son. He may remember who he is. Give him. . . ." Painfully the dying man got a hand in his pocket, pulled out the relic Duke had known as his lucky pocket piece. He had difficulty removing his hand, more in lifting it to drop the thing in Duke's hand. "Give him this an' you two should get along all right."

It was a 'dobe dollar, through which was a ragged bullet hole. The disc was cupped on one side, broken-edged and pocket-worn on the other. Duke had seen the old drover toying with it in the past, but this was his first real look at it.

"What happened to this *peso,* Limpy?" he asked.

There was no answer. When Duke looked up he knew Limpy would never speak again. He had drifted over "yonderly. . . ."

These were the thoughts Duke was thinking, memories he was reviving, there beside the graves of the Pine Tree crew. The hoot of an owl aroused him to the needs of the present. Darkness had fallen. It was a long, long way to Texas and the Rio Grande. A grave-filler rode that trail, his pockets jingling with thirty-thousand dollars stained with the blood of boys whose only sin was in being exhausted and needing sleep. Duke rose to his saddle, turned his pony's head southward. He was a little confused.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Bends in the Gun Trail

RIDING southward, Duke watched the purple haze shroud the rugged Chinatis. He spoke a name, Chinati Crain. Wonder if Kate can help, he thought, and smiled, stirring his sweat-streaked pony toward Polverado Crossing.

Weeks in the saddle had strengthened his wounds, filled him out, banished his pallor. His quest had become an obsession. Sometimes he heard ghostly laughter, as if his brother Billy was pleased with his ugly thinking. And sometimes he wondered if he was loco.

Dusk softened the unlovely street as he entered Polverado. He scowled, hating this clearing house of outlawry and rendezvous of evil men. The place flaunted its ill repute, defying efforts to halt the flow of wet cattle across its ford. Except for Kate, Duke would have ridden far to avoid the town.

Kate Stedman, Queen of the Crossing! Because respectable Texans shunned Polverado, she was target for undeserved slander. Straight as a gun barrel, she was loved by many, claimed by none. A fine business woman and good scout, she had an infectious laugh and no defense against panhandlers. Her ornate Keno Palace, inherited from the square gambler who had sired her, dominated the street paralleling the river. Looking at its front now, Duke felt his heart leap. At first sight of Kate, he had wanted her. Never unkind, she had nonetheless laughed at his affection.

Duke grained his pony, got supper at a lunch counter and walked into the Palace. Polverado was not yet awake. Trade languished. The houseman, Tom Marty, spotted him, cried his name and hurried forward, hands outstretched. "Duke Brackett! You sure are good for sore eyes. Outside your hard luck, how are tricks?"

Tom, with a gambler's studied casualness, shook hands. Duke seized upon the fact that word had preceded him, posting the thought he'd ask Tom what he'd learned . . . and how. He said: *"Poco-poco,* Tom. Kate about?"

"Kate?" Marty scowled. "Can't keep track of her, Duke. Can I help?"

"Fetch some Valley Tan to yonder corner table," Brackett said. "I'm getting drunk."

That idea brought small comfort. Whiskey cloyed his taste. The town awoke. Palace gamblers spread their games. Patrons filtered in. Cowboys. Grizzled cowmen. Flashy vaqueros and courtly rancheros from below river. About an hour, Duke eyeballed the play. Then the barroom clamor dimmed. Keno Kate came in the front.

Wavy blonde hair tumbled from the brim of her J. B. Her black velvet gown had given way to denims, plaid shirt, chaps and boots. She was spurred, dust-powdered. A quirt looped her left wrist. A pearl-handled .38 hung at her waist. She came down the long hall, lithe, queenly, and Duke felt his cheeks flush.

She was somewhat older than he, but that had never mattered. He'd never seen another woman he wanted, one he seemingly had less chance with. Despite discouragement, he never entirely lost hope. He saw her waking and sleeping, in the dust of cow work, beside lonely campfires. Nothing in the world seemed more important.

Kate's eyes lighted as she spotted him. He moved to meet her and took her hands. "Kate!"

"Duke, boy!" Some hint of trouble dulled her voice. He held her off, drinking in her beauty. He kissed her impulsively. "No, Duke . . . not here. Come sit down. I want to hear about you." And, when they were seated: "We were so sorry to hear of your trouble. All that work, effort, expense. . . . it's terrible. Tick fever, that was it, Duke?"

He searched her eyes then, found them truthful and was surprised. "Tick fever," he lied. "How'd you learn, Kate?"

She shrugged. "Words drifts down into the bend. Tell me about it."

"Lost the first cow the day we hit Kansas. The herd melted." He watched her eye and knew she hadn't learned the truth. "My own loss was bad, but what of my friends who consigned their beef?"

"Consignors take their chances, Duke. You mustn't feel guilty."

"I'll pay them all back when I get on my feet, Kate. But it puts off the day I can take you out of this. You're not happy here."

She grew grave. "I'm successful, Duke. I make money." Her fingers pressed his.

"I'm fond of you, Duke, very fond of you."

"Sounds good," Duke grinned. "Say it again. And tell me when you'll marry me."

A frown touched her brow. "Maybe sometime," she murmured. "Not now. I want to help you, Duke. Help you to build back. Thousands of Mexican cattle bawl for some man to pilot them across the Line."

Duke caught the bitterness in her voice. "That doesn't sound like you, Kate. What's wrong?"

She forced a smile and got to her feet. She held out her hand. "Forget it, partner. I've got important things to do now but remember this: for my money you're a good bet anytime. See Tom. He'll let you have up to five thousand. And keep smiling."

Troubled, he watched her cross to Tom Marty, speak briefly, then climb the stairs to her quarters. All the pretty speeches he had planned he had forgotten. It had always been so when he looked at Kate. He poured a drink, but whiskey couldn't dull his loneliness.

Idly, he watched the entry of a dozen grim, bearded men. The leader interested him. Tall, broad-shouldered and heavily built. Dark locks brushing his shoulders. A stern, ruggedly-chiseled face. Slitted eyes and a sureness of manner that antagonized Duke instantly. Listening, he seemed to hear again that deep-toned cry: *"God giveth and God taketh away."* It couldn't be, he told himself. The killer had blond hair, maybe white. This one's hair was chestnut.

DUKE saw Marty shake hands with the leader and order whiskey. When Tom left the man, Duke got up. Marty beckoned him into the cubby office. When cigars were going, Tom said, "Kate spoke to me, Duke. How much you need?"

"What I need, Tom, isn't in your safe. Who's the gent with the long hair?"

Marty looked surprised. "To me," he said, stiffly, "any man who comes in that front door is a customer—only that. What his business is, how he was christened, what he's thinking, those things take a back seat if he pays for his fun, behaves himself. . . . oh, hell, you understand that, Duke. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. He sort of resembles a feller I saw once, up north. A gent with long white hair, a bull voice and a good shooting eye. A feller that maybeso has a passage of Scripture for every occasion. Ever know a man like that?"

"Can't say I have." Marty acted uneasy. "Now to change the subject and get back to that money. Kate must have thought you needed it or she wouldn't have spoke like she did. I got orders to let you have five thousand. That ain't scum of the river, Duke."

Duke was thinking what a difference that money might make if his manhunt dragged out a long time, telling himself the lift might make the difference between success and failure. Nettled, he said, "To hell with the money, Tom. If and when I need it, I'll ask and be grateful. But—"

"No need to be grateful, Duke. Say the word and that money's yours—on the house, no obligation. Hell, this isn't a loan, boy."

"What do you mean?"

Marty glanced warily out the window. "You know Kate's brother? Long Ben? The Kid's eighteen and he thinks he's a man. Kate must have thought so too. She sent him across the Rio with six men and important money. He bought a thousand breeders from the Herrera people, started them back here to stock Kate's new ranch. He didn't get back. One of his cowhands staggered back here, all shot to hell, to tell us of a night attack and a wipe-out."

"Poor Kate," said Duke. "That's what ailed her. It's tough."

"Tough, but not the worst. Listen. When she came in here tonight, she'd been out hiring fighters. Right this minute, she's leading them south into Mexico, to take cattle her money paid for and to fetch back Herrera's ears."

"No!" Duke came up, in protest. "She's crazy. Herrera's got a million head. He got her money. What would he want with the cattle?"

"That's what I told her, but you know Kate. She believes it and she'll ride to hell on the chance. You're fond of her and you know her chances in that country better than most. That's why you're going after her—for five thousand dollars. The men she's got along are no good. Unless I'm missing a bet, she'll need help."

Duke's hands were clenched. "You know

I can't refuse, Tom. I'll need fighting men. Know where I can get any?"

Marty stroked his long jaw. "You were asking about those gents at the bar. They're gunhawks from the Chinatis. Brace them. I think they'll jump at a hundred dollars apiece for a month's work. Hire them and I'll foot the bill."

"Not Chinati Crain's outfit?"

Marty blinked. "*Quien sabe?* Ask them." And as Duke turned toward the door, he said: "Hey! One thing keep in mind. The wounded puncher who died, right here in this room, said one thing you maybe ought to know. It makes no sense to me, but . . . well, he said the leader of the attack against them was a burly man who kept roaring something about God giving and God taking away. See what you can make of it and for God's sake bring Kate back."

For an instant Duke was tempted to sit down again and tell Tom the whole story of what had happened to the Pine Tree outfit. Then he thought of Kate, galloping southward. He swayed toward the door, let himself into the barroom. His eyes were on the tough-looking hillmen, joking, laughing, slaking their thirst at the bar. As he approached them, he was sizing up the leader, fingering Old Limpy's pocket piece.

A step echoed behind him. A hand fell on his shoulder. "Hi, Brackett!"

Duke turned. It was Lucky Larribee, a drover he had met in Caldwell City only the night before the fight on the Shakaska. Despite Duke's patent annoyance at the interruption, Larribee was pleased at the meeting, insistent that Duke drink with him.

"What you doing here?" Duke asked, over his glass. "Thought you trailed beef up through Paso."

"I do." Lucky laughed easily. "Right now I'm lookin' over another way outa Mexico. You see . . ." his grin faded and annoyance touched his eyes. "Word of your fever herd ran up and down the Trail. If you'll remember, I was a day or two ahead of you when I met you in Caldwell. First thing I knew, I was stopped by a quarantine gun crew. They hit me up for an inspection fee, a charge out of all reason. I tried to beat it. They seized my cattle. Legal theft. Seein' that you busted me, Brackett, I thought you might be interested in helpin' me back on my feet an' takin' yourself a winnin' at the same time."

Duke stared at him. Fever herd! Here it was again. Had this man spread the Texas fever yarn? Or had he been taken in by it? He said, "Was that inspection crew led by a big man with light hair?"

Lucky started. "Why, yes. It was. You ran afoul of him, eh? Hard man. But that's water under the bridge. If we're smart, we can balance our losses."

"How?"

"Half the Texas outfits was built on wet cattle, Brackett. Better men than us got rich that-away. I happen to know where the beef is an' how an' when it's guarded. Interested?"

"Sounds talky-talk," said Duke. "Season's about over. What would you do with the critters?"

"Big demand in the Territories."

"Yeah? But what would they use for money out there?"

"Land grants. We trade our beef for land, savvy? Ever hear of Olalio Herrera, cow king of Mexico? Owns a million square miles an' twice that many cattle. He patrols his spread with a private army. I got his agent drunk in Paso. He talked. I know where an' when his patrols pass certain points, per schdule. I'll put up the info an' you put up three thousand simoleons."

"Where would I get that kind of money?"

Lucky grinned. "From what I hear, Kate will stake you for five. You won't find a better gamble, Brackett."

Duke's jaw set. Kate was out there now, prepared to go through hell to take cattle she had paid for in gold. There must be a better deal than that. "I'll think it over," he said. "Meet me here at eight tomorrow."

Lucky drained his glass, winked broadly and departed. Something about him I don't like, Duke thought. Yet he might be a handy man to take along, if only to give Kate a hand.

Hitching his gunbelt, he ordered drinks for the *buscaderos* along the bar.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Paisano Trail

DUKE met resistance when he braced the bearded giant. But he played him like a trout, never giving slack, never show-

ing impatience. In the end, when the battle seemed lost, it was the bullet-distorted pocket piece that turned the trick. The man's eyes burned.

"Old Limpy . . . gone?" he murmured. "I'm right sorry to l'arn it. No man ever had a better friend. All I know—ridin', shootin', ropin', how to live off the hills, he taught me. You had me right, neighbor. I'm Chinati Crain, an' I feel like I'd lost my own dad. Limpy's friend is my friend. What in hell you aim to do down in Mexico?"

Not until then did Duke tell him about Kate. The man grew more like granite and his big hands knotted into fists. "Why didn't you say so at first?" he demanded. "That gal's got no business down yonder. What we waitin' for?" And then, when Duke told him who he was, the man's greenish eyes grew vacant with memories. He filled his glass and stood staring at nothing.

"The whelp of Ol' Lawson Brackett," he muttered. "Law Brackett, we used to call him among the rangers. A better man with a horse an' gun than any of us; I reckon Limpy told yuh that. We put up at your ranch when we was cleanin' Ol' Blas Rosas an' his throat-cutters out of the Apache Mountains. I got this," he bared an ugly scar on his left arm, "sidin' yore ol' man when he was killed, down on the Border below Osman. . . ."

"Why, that was only three years ago," Duke said, surprised.

Chinati laughed. "On a Friday, the thirteenth of March. Yore dad had gone down there to pick up a bargain in cattle. I l'arned something about the deal that he couldn't know, rode down there with my boys to see that what Ol' Law got was only a bargain. Well, we run into rain' an' was an hour late gettin' there. Found the Pine Tree punchers takin' yore dad home, dead. He'd paid for the beef an' taken it over. The seller took 'em back, fast, killed Ol' Law an' got across the Rio with a herd to sell to some other bargain-hunter. I went across after 'em, but they was too strong. All I got was this." He tapped the scar on his arm.

"That game's gettin' popular," Duke said. "It's how Limpy died." He told the story, never sparing himself. And when he came to the bawled warcry of the burly leader of the raiders, Chinati's eyes narrowed to slits and a rough gust of breath came from his lungs.

"I'll be here at daylight tomorrow," he growled. "We'll start when you're ready." He turned to his men. "To yore horses, boys. After tomorrow, we're a-settin' on the devil's eggs an' hell is due to hatch. Let's go."

* * *

Dust! Thirst! Monotonous click of hoofs an' creaking of gear, under a brassy sun. Twenty-five men—sixteen from the Chinatis and half that many under Lucky Larribee. A forty-horse cavvy and twelve burdened pack mules.

From the moment Chinati Crain learned that Larribee and seven men were part of the expedition, he showed open resentment. He said nothing against that outfit; he didn't need to. He held his men apart from the others, never noticing them. He was silent, sullen, his slitted eyes always ahead as they moved westward and a little south from the crossing.

Toward the end of the third day, an adobe pueblo loomed up ahead, squatting like a toad beside the tree-lined barranca. Chinati came back to ride beside Duke. "Todos Santos," he said. "I got a friend here, alcalde of the town an' district livestock inspector. He's underpaid, always thirsty an' busted. He can do us some good."

It meant a judicious expenditure of money. Duke had plenty, thanks to Tom Marty. Duke, fully confident of this one-time ranger turned outlaw, left the matter in Chinati's hands. He was a little surprised at the man's modest demand for fifty dollars. Duke let him have it and the result amazed him.

With the horses in the town corral, they were welcomed to Todos Santos by Alcalde Ramon Estudillo in flowery fashion. He declared a fiesta for the morrow and Chinati advised the wait-over. With Lucky grousing bitterly at the delay, they were made guests of honor at a celebration not easily forgotten. Cock fights. Chicken pulls. Horse racing and steer roping. Pit-roasted beeves. Tubs of *frijoles con chile*. Piles of crisp fried *tortillas*. Wine, *pulque* and *mescal*.

People came from many miles around. A military band and numbers of string orchestras. Minstrels, clowns and singers. A *fandango,* with dancing until morning. Not until farewells were said at daylight and the Americans had departed did Chinati hand Duke a signed and sealed permit to drive three thousand cattle across the district. "This," he said, "will come in handy if we happen to pick up a bunch uh cows an' meet up with an army patrol."

Dozing in their saddles, the Texans shoved westward. New grimness lay upon them now. Dead ahead reared the misty outlines of drab Sierra foothills—the borderline of Herrera ranges. Clouds came drifting up, blotting out the sun. A stiff wind whipped the creosote plains, driving buzzards before it.

Night brought a gale-lashed rain. Lightning hurled its fiery, forked trails earthward and thunder crashed and rolled. There was no shelter from the downpour that chilled men and horses. Camp was made in a protected arroyo and soaked, miserable men took turn and turn about guarding the restless cavvy. A bitter night, that one, for hungry, chilled, doggedly weary men denied the solace of fire.

Around midnight, the wind grew wicked. The rain came faster. A bolt of lightning struck close to the horses. A pony screamed and fell. Duke, glued to a soaked saddle, smelled brimstone and felt cactus-like pricklings on his skin. Half stunned, he failed to counter the sudden pitching of his mount, wound up on his knees with two hands full of mud.

SUCCEEDING blackness was intense. The ponies were bolting, whinnying their terror. Rain fell in torrents. Stumbling, slipping, Duke shouted for his men, his words whipped from his lips by the gale. He was badly buffeted and hopelessly lost when the storm drew away to the south and a wan moon showed an arroyo running bank full, both mounted and unmounted men wandering around like lost souls and a few loose, badly frightened ponies.

The scattered men were drawn together, a tally taken. There were eleven of Chinati's men, six of Lucky's. They found another Larribee man dead, crushed under his maimed pony. When all seventeen were ahorse, they were able to round up one mule and five spare ponies. A flood crest had sloshed through the camp, taking blankets, utensils and all but two boxes of grub that had been hung in a scrub tree. It was a sorry, bedraggled outfit that struggled to get a fire going and await the dawn.

"Thing for us to do," grumbled a Chinati mountain man, "is to backtrack for home, come sun-up. If them others was alive, we'd see 'em on this plain. They're drownded, that's what, includin' the chief. We're a bad luck outfit."

Duke's laugh wasn't convincing. "Things will look different in sunlight, boys. You can't tell me Chinati would go under in a storm like this. Lucky's an old trail hand who's messed with floods that make this look like a drizzle. The other five missing signed on as tough hands. Loss of horses and grub is the most serious problem. But we're not too far from Candaleria—south along the hills. Don't give up till we see how bad we're hurt."

He found a bottle in one of the packs. It made a nip around and was more cheering than his words. Dawn broke and the sun lifted cheerlessly over a sea of mud. Arroyos still roared. Not a man or a pony could be discerned across the flooded flats. It depressed them all, part grieving for Chinati, the rest for Larribee. Sun and a full belly helped even the most pessimistic. While a grave was being fashioned and the mule being packed, Duke looked for some sign to explain the disappearance of the missing men. But rain had washed out all tracks, including those of Kate and her outfit, which they had followed faithfully.

It was the thought of Kate and what might so easily have befallen her that lent Duke the eloquence to talk the others into going on. That and the promise that they would share in whatever cattle they might drive out of Mexico.

Leaving their mud-banked grave behind, they continued on, making no attempt to move warily. According to the calendar, borrowed from Lucky Larribee in long talks by the campfires, Duke knew the Herrera patrol would have passed. And it would be a week before they hit this scope of country again.

Late that afternoon the hills emerged from their haze shroud. Rolling brushlands reaching upward toward hidden Sierra peaks. A lonely range, haunt of wild cattle

and wolves. It seemed to depress the men. "If we'd bin smart," complained one, "we'd uh turned back. I can smell bad luck."

They camped beside a creek that evening. Duke shot a deer and they ate their first full meal since the storm. Careful guard was kept over the ponies. Loss of a few more would surely hamstring them. Those not standing guard crowded the cheerful fire, the heat making them drowsy. Talk languished. Duke and the men were black targets against the blaze, but no man felt fear. If ever a range seemed devoid of humans, it was this one. An hour had passed and a few slept, sitting up. A twig snapped, out yonder in the night. Duke, flattening, swiveling his glance, saw light glint off a gun barrel in the brush. A Chinati mountain man came up, palmed his gun and darted into the brush.

Sounds of a grunt. A gun echoing against flesh. A low curse. The swift violence of struggle. Duke scattered the fire with a sweep of his boot, leaped toward those sounds. He heard a man's plaintive voice, vibrant with anger. "What the hell ails you? I go through hell, spot the fire an'—"

"Build 'er up, Brackett," broke in the Chinati man. "I got a snake in the grass, bellyin' onto the camp with a six-shooter in his paws. It's that scaly Lucky Larribee!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Skunk Tracks

DUKE was silent as he built up the fire, wondering, knowing instinctively this was something more than a lost man's wary approach to a strange camp. Anyone lost as long as Lucky would have hailed the camp, no matter whose it was. The buscadero from the Chinatis came slogging into the firelight, prodding before him a man holding one hand high and the other on a cut scalp. "I used him rough," his captor gloated. "Me, I don't like coyotes skulkin' about."

"I wasn't skulking," Larribee raged. "Why should I bust in like a damned fool? This is bad country. I seen a fire an' approached it careful, never knowin' whose it might be. I've had enough trouble. I'm takin' no chances."

He sank beside the fire, holding his throbbing head. Duke, looking at his boots which were muddied but little above the soles, said, "What happened, Lucky?"

"Damn near everything. When the lightnin' struck, my pony was shy a bridle. Mebby the lightnin' stripped it off, I dunno. But there we was, him spookin' across the flats, me chokin' the biscuit. All night he run, carryin' me across a slough uh rivers where I might' near drowned. Come sun-up, we was in the hills an' my bronc was down. Foundered. I'm afoot, wore out, lost. I walk till I'm tuckered an' starved weak, outa smokin' an' not able to find a soul. Then I come across a round-up camp an' throw a feed down. Nobody's there, the boys bein' out messin' around with a big beef herd. I snuk out without bein' seen an' plumb walked my shanks off. Musta walked fifty mile. I'm sure wore out."

Silence greeted the recital. Duke saw the others, even Lucky's own men, eyeing those boots. The man was lying. Why? Puzzling over the answer, Duke rolled Lucky a cigarette. The man lighted it with trembling hand, listened while Duke spun a brief story of their experiences. Lucky had none of the gauntness that should have gone with his ordeal. He declined food. And, when Duke asked about the herd, the man's eyes glowed.

"Nothin' in the camp to tell me who they are," he mused. "But they're white men, not Herrera's crowd. They musta started gatherin' the minute the patrol passed. They're holdin' a lot uh critters an' addin' more. A tough lot, too. Bad as I needed help, I wouldn't call on them." His eyes found Duke's. "Border-hoppers from up Paso way, I reckon. I wouldn't wonder they could tell what come of Keno Kate. Wanta poke up there in the mornin' an' see?"

He was eager, too eager. Duke sensed something wrong here, something sour, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The man had come down here after cattle; that was reason enough now for his excitement and Duke accepted it. Anyhow, he couldn't overlook one bet that might lead him to Kate. He nodded. In the morning they would have a look. The men were talking among themselves, all hot for it.

"Nice fer some Paso outfit to gether them beefs fer us, ain't it?" grinned one of Chinati's men.

"Ain't it?" echoed Lucky. He stretched

out beside the fire and was instantly asleep. But Duke sat there a long time, stoking the fire, staring at the hills that were the range of the feared Olalio Herrera. Hills that held the key to mysteries that left him perplexed and restless. He found himself mourning the loss of the big outlaw and former ranger who called himself Chinati Crain. Missing his knowledge and counsel.

DUKE, leading his riders, was first to see the contraband herd. Lucky had not exaggerated. A horde of cattle milled in an oak-studded *rincon*. Swift riding cowboys were whooping in more. The approach of the Polverado outfit drew a warning yell from a cowboy. For an instant there was confusion in the ranks of the round-up crew. The leader bawled something lost across the quarter mile interval. Twelve riders wheeled and galloped into the brushy cover of the hill, behind which lifted a thin curl of smoke. Then the leader, with a dozen men behind him, came loping to meet the invaders, deploying as they came.

They approached to within a hundred yards before the leader curbed, motioning his men to halt. His small, restless eyes took swift stock. His head sank into his shoulders. "Who are yuh? What yuh want? Yo're on my range."

"Yeah." Duke led the careful approach. "Then you're Olalio Herrera?"

"I've killed men fer less than callin' me a Spic." The leader glared. "I'm Sacaton Frost, from up Denver way. I crossed a few important palms, filed my *denunciamento*, an' these hills is mine, with everything in 'em. Any objections?"

"None," snapped Duke. "I stopped to ask if you'd seen a horseback outfit—a woman an' ten riders."

Frost's shoebutton eyes flattened. "When it suits me," he sneered, "I'm the blindest gent you ever saw. You ain't foolin' me, hombre. Yo're a Texican an' I never knowed one that wasn't cow hungry. Born rustlers. I got a herd here an' I'm takin' no chances." He pulled out a tiny silver watch, snapped it open. "I'm givin' you five minutes to stir a tall dust."

An ugly laugh ran through the Chinati mountain men. But Duke didn't laugh. He knew that watch, a small, six-sided affair bought for Keno Kate by an admiring captain at Fort Early. The fob, two diamonds from a rattlesnake's back, had been fashioned for her by Duke himself. Rage ran through him and he sent his pony leaping forward. His warning: "This is it, boys," alerted his men. His hand was away from his gun and his voice was deceptively gentle. "There's bad Texans an' good Texans, Frost. Let's prove we're all right."

"One minute," droned the rustler, tightly. "Get back!"

"Can't you use eighteen men, say against Herrera's patrols?"

"Nothin' doin'. Frost fights his own battles. *Two minutes!*"

"Come back, you damned fool!" Lucky Larribee cried. "He means it."

Duke's smile deepened. He didn't slow his advance. Frost, secure in the drop of his riflemen on the ridge, let him approach, shifting his glance from the watch to Duke and back again. *"Three minutes,"* he sang out.

The least slip now would prove fatal, Duke knew that. He drew rein before Frost, lifting his knee as if to rest it around the horn. Instead, with his weight on one stirrup, he launched himself.

Too late, the blocky Border-hopper saw him coming, dropped the watch and tried to drag his iron. Duke's arms encircled him. Duke's shoulder caught him under the breast bone, carrying him out of his stirrups and over the rump of his staggered pony. The rustler nearest Frost managed to pull and lower his saddle gun.

All was chaos in one moment. Sacaton's blistering profanity as he struggled. The shrill fighting yells of the Chinati men. Blasts of guns and thunder of hoofs as the rustlers broke for cover. All these blended into a mighty uproar.

Frost was powerful, desperate. He rolled Duke under, kneed him and broke free. Duke came to his knees, swerving and launching himself as Frost righted about and drew his short gun. A crimson splash of fire lashed at him. Shock ran through him as he struck Frost, hurling him back. He caught the man's gun arm, bowing his head as Frost's left fist rained punishing blows upon him.

Hard put to hang onto Frost's gun arm, Duke lowered his head and bit . . . deep. Frost dropped the weapon. Duke kicked the gun away and then Frost wrenched

loose from him, backed lithely and came in with swinging fists.

There was a fierce explosion of breath in Duke's face, enormous shoulders battering his chest, bearing him back and down with Frost's arm encircling his neck.

FROST was reaching for Duke's gun but he came out behind. Duke drew the weapon and Frost released his choking hold to grapple for it. Duke dragged down a life-giving breath into his starved lungs and gave over his urge to drive lead into Frost's middle. Frost dead could not reveal what he knew about Kate. He got his hand free and drove the gun barrel into the big rustler's face.

Any one of those blows would have laid out an ordinary man. But not Frost. He tried to cover up but Duke smashed down his guard. As Frost bent under the punishment, Duke hurled him off, came to his knees and reached him with a full arm swing. Frost crumpled like a shot beef.

Duke came up, breathing hard. The Frost men were backing into the brush, leaving two of their number stretched in the mud. From the ridgeback, gunfire winked dully and bullets droned over the crouched and carefully advancing men from Polverado.

Duke had been doubtful of Larribee, but yonder he was, seemingly everywhere at once, reckless of danger as he urged his followers to the kill. One of his men was down. Oaths snarled across the flat. Gun echoes shook the hills. The herd, untended and alarmed, strung up the valley in two columns. In all that tumult and invitation to battle, it seemed strange that Duke should notice that thin plume of smoke curling over the ridge. It hit him a solid blow. The camp. Maybe they held Kate there.

Leaving the unconscious Frost, he forked the animal and spurred around the brushy point. As he rode he heard Lucky's gleeful yell. "Tally another! These baboons are easy!"

The hill curved and the brush thinned. The trail veered into a canyon and Duke smelled woodsmoke. Dismounting, he tied his pony and went warily up afoot. Voices arrested him. Proceeding cautiously, he eased through a fringe of willows and saw two men arguing. They held rifles and kept glancing up at the ridge, where firing was heavier. One was grousing. "Hell, Lem, I ain't lost no Texicans. Foolin' with that female was a mistake, like I told Sacaton. No, I ain't goin' up yonder an' git salivated. I'm stayin' here. Yeah, an' dustin' if the goin' gets too rough."

The other man stepped into his saddle. "You fer it, Gar. But I wouldn't let Frost learn them thoughts. Woman or no woman, I'm goin' up an' fight."

He surged up the slope, never looking back. The other man stood beside his horse, fingering his weapon, torn between two fears. One look at the camp and Duke knew no prisoner was held there. The renegade's pony hid him as he darted ahead, damp sand muffling his movements. He was on top the man before he was discovered. The fellow lifted his head. His mouth sagged open. His eyes widened. Then he was falling, loosing a throttled croak, as Duke reached across his saddle and buffaloed him.

Duke dragged the fellow to the water hole and ducked him. He had pulled his blow and soon the man opened his eyes and cringed. "Don't . . . don't hit me."

"Tough rustler," scoffed Duke. "You ought to get a tin-cup and some pencils and go to beggin'. Where's Kate?"

"The woman? I had nothin' to do with it, mister. Honest."

"Where is she? Answer or I'll strip the hide off you."

"She got away, honest Injun. Her men tried to glaum our herd. They was all killed. We left the woman tied up in camp. She got away. When we come back to camp her ropes was layin' where we'd left her. They'd bin cut with a sharp knife. One horsebacker'd bin in camp, et some grub an' rode away with the woman. That's all I know."

Duke put on plenty of pressure without learning anything else. The escape had been day before yesterday. There had been no signs of another rider invading the camp at any time. To Duke, that added up to one sure thing. Lucky Larribee had entered the camp of the Border-hoppers, taken what food he needed, cut Kate loose and ridden away with her.

Contemplating this conclusion, Duke felt himself in the grip of hopelessness, his heart sinking. When Lucky told about the visit

to the camp, why had he withheld any mention of Kate, unless. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Riders of the Gun Priest

DUKE felt death brush past him as the bullet came winging off the ridge. It struck the sitting renegade, Gar, in the chest. He bent over in agony, cried faintly and fell over on his side. He was dead instantly. Duke spun, flattened. Up yonder, in the brush, he caught a man's image, fired. The rifleman dropped his weapon, clutched at his side and disappeared.

Rising, Duke sprinted up the slope. At the ridge, firing swelled. Somewhere a man cried desperately, "Ain't no stoppin' them Texican devils. I'm gettin' scarce."

The brush ahead was agitated as the Border-hoppers broke down. Behind them lifted the yells of Lucky and his men. Duke turned his gun loose, raking the brush aisles, forcing the rustlers back. Bullets screamed toward him and he bellied down. A moment later, the Polverado men came swarming over the hill. A short, swift and deadly struggle on the slope. Every man for himself. The harried renegades firing wildly, missing. The Texans never missing. Firing died away. At least a dozen of Frost's men were down, the rest snaking through the thickets in a desperate try at escape. Several broke for their horses, tethered under the ridge. They didn't make it. A swift exchange of shouts. Lucky came down to Duke, flushed with victory.

"Good boy," he applauded. "You flanked 'em for us. That made it easy. But why in hell did you jump Frost the way you done? That looked like suicide."

Duke's lips flattened. "That illegitimate had Kate's watch."

"Oh!" Lucky's exultation died. "Then . . . then them devils musta done away with her. They got their needin's."

Duke stared at him. "Just how do you know," he asked, "that I didn't find her tied up in their camp? Huh?"

Lucky twisted, his eyes suddenly touched with fright. "Oh, I—I don't. You didn't say nothin', so I thought. . . ."

Duke turned away from him, knowing in another minute he could no longer contain the rage building up in him. By his book, Lucky had already proved his guilt. He deserved to be shot in the guts and left to die. But that wouldn't help Kate, if indeed Kate were not past help.

Duke flung down the slant, flinging back across his shoulder, "To hell with your presumin'. Take the boys and turn that herd. Get 'em started east. I'll join you later."

He got his pony, rode to the mouth of the draw and dismounted to search for sign. The trail itself was all chewed up with the hoofs of Border-hopper horses. He did not look there, but rather well off the trail. And so he came to the hoofmarks of a single galloping horse, made after the rain had ceased. The track bore to the south, following the hill toe, ran into a faint wagon road which veered a little east. This writhed up a low range of juniper hills, over a low summit and down into a valley. It was that basin that gave Duke pause, that left him amazed and wondering.

Like a jewel in a setting of rugged buttes, that valley lay spread out in mirage-like beauty. Laced by roads running to the cardinal points, roads bordering lush fields, orchards and pastures. Cross laced with bank-full ditches drawn from the lazy river debouching from the mountains and winding sinuously down the basin. Here and there were houses, their windows reflecting back the light. Fat livestock between fences. Smoke hanging low, where men cleared virgin land and burned the brush.

Duke blinked and he knew it was real, not a vision. But what was it? He had not heard of such a development. From the direction taken by the tracks he followed, somewhere down yonder, where a cluster of houses and larger buildings indicated the beginning of a town, Kate must be held.

Suddenly excited, Duke stirred his pony, dropped out of the junipers and onto the creosote plain. Presently he crossed a corduroy bridge over the first canal and found himself between barbwire fences, a corn field on one side, a stand of wheat on the other. Ahead, on the left, was a house and Duke's attention was attracted by the uplifted voices of men and the insistent barking of a dog.

Duke was smiling but the smile was rubbed out when, sharp and snarling, the report of a gun crackled across the corn patch and the barking dog yelped once and

was still. A woman screamed shrilly.

Duke sank his spurs, hurled his pony ahead. Short of the gate, where the tall corn bordered the drive, he slowed a little, staring at the scene in the dooryard. Two men held a struggling, striking, biting girl, trying to boost her into a saddle. A third man, with pistol drawn, held off a bald-headed man, who had halted as he moved to the aid of the girl. As Duke watched, the old man made a desperate effort to break past the menacing gun. The gun rose and fell smashing against the old man's skull. He reeled and fell.

Duke swore, spurred through the gate and down the drive, shooting. The man who had dropped the oldster staggered, cried out, spun and sent a bullet droning past Duke. The pair at the horses released the girl, spun and drew. Duke dropped one, who came up screaming warnings and straddled his horse. A shotgun boomed from the house and the third man settled, clapped his hand to his side and stumbled to his pony. A moment later, the three of them were ahorse, tearing out through the corn. Duke didn't chase them.

When he drew rein and dismounted, the girl was holding the old man's head in her lap, dabbing at his bleeding scalp with her apron. Duke said, "I'll take him, miss," lifted the old man and bore him toward the door, where a tired-looking, elderly woman stood with a smoking shotgun in her hands and a dazed look in her eyes.

"Is . . . is gran'pa dead?" she asked, weakly.

The old man was twisting in Duke's arms, groaning a little. Duke said, "No, ma'am. But that feller hit him pretty hard. Better get something to tie up his hurt head."

The old woman seemed frozen, hopeless, unable to move. The girl darted past him, led him to a bedroom, turning down the covers. Duke helped get the old fellow undressed and between blankets.

THE house was spotlessly clean, but meagerly furnished. The farm, he thought, gave these people a living but little money. The girl's graceful fingers worked at the bandage, the old woman standing by. The girl was eighteen, he thought. She had honey-colored hair done in two thick braids. Her calico was clean but faded. She wore boy's sturdy shoes, scuffed and worn. She was pale but her voice, as she spoke to the injured man, was full and strong and unafraid.

"It's all right, Grandpa. There now. Don't try to get up. You'll be fine."

The man's voice came weakly. "The A O V, they . . . they're . . . ?"

"Gone, Grandpa. Grandma shot one, a stranger shot the other two. They ran away."

She moved aside and the suffering man's faded eyes fell upon Duke, looking him up and down, studying him. "I . . . I thank you, stranger. But I fear you've got yourself deep in trouble. The A O V never forgets. More of them will come back here and then. . . ." He shook his head, closing his eyes.

"Who's the A O V?" Duke asked.

The girl answered. "The Angels of Vengeance—a cult within our church. They are self-appointed zealots who enforce the church injunctions and punish sinners and transgressors."

"Devils," murmured the old man. "Sons of Satan."

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned the old woman. "Sh-h-h-h, Aaron."

"Don't shush me, Gran'ma. I speak God's truth." His eyes were fired now and they were on Duke. "You see, stranger, there are two factions in our church—those who follow the Holy Word and cleave unto one woman. And those who practice plural marriage, according to the vision of the Prophet Hirum, who established the Brothers of Solomon here in Colonia Segundo. The A O V takes the Prophet's view."

"They're trying to make you take another wife?" asked Duke.

The old man smiled. "Hardly. They want our Tara for a man who already has four wives, just as they wanted her mother, our daughter, for another man with three. They will kill anyone who stands in the way, just as they killed Tara's father. In her grief and shame, our daughter took her life. We have raised Tara and want to spare her that fate. Mother and I would die if we were to lose Tara, but at least we could die happy if we knew she was safe, away from all this. Stranger," his gaze hit Duke with a solid impact, "could we trust you to take the girl out of here, say

to El Paso. I'll pay you well for it."

Duke was thinking of the picture he drew, thinking of Kate with a sinking of the heart. He could not doubt that she was in this colony where some of the men were mad for women, pretty women. He could not hope that he was in time to save her. Except for Kate, he would have volunteered instantly. He looked at Tara. She was grimly defiant.

"No," she said. "I'll not leave them, mister. They are all I have in this world. If I leave, they will be killed, according to the code. Revenge. No, I shall stay and die with them."

"I'll stay with you," Duke said.

"You don't know Crain, the head of A O V," the old man said. "He is strong and ruthless. He'll bring his full force against us after nightfall."

They went out, closing his door. The old woman was whimpering. "Dear God, what will become of us?"

Duke patted her shoulder. "Don't you worry, Grandma. I think things are going to be all right."

There were tears in the girl's eyes. "Thank you, Mister—"

"Brackett. Duke Brackett. I'm a cowman, Tara, and I have men who can be brought in if need be." He was thoughtful, running a name on his tongue. "Crain? Not Bill Crain, the man called Chinati?"

Tara started. "No. Bill Crain once was deacon of our church, steady, dependable, fighting polygamy. Arrested by the A O V, he was judged by the prophet—Hirum, found guilty of heresy, publicly flogged and banished across the Line. We heard he became a Texas ranger. One day he returned, visited Hirum. Nobody knows what happened. When Crain rode away, Hirum was dead. We heard Bill was dismissed from the rangers for entering Mexico without orders. He was a good man. But Ezra, his brother and head of A O V, is a monster."

So that was it. Things cleared in Duke's mind. "Bill *was* a good man, Tara. I came to Mexico with him. He died in the storm, some days ago."

As if in answer, hoofbeats echoed outside. Tara gasped. Grandma cringed, moaning. Duke leaped doorward, gun bared. A knock. Duke called: "Who's there?"

"Open, Aaron. It's Bill Crain!"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Ghost Warning

CHINATI came in smiling. "How come you're at friend Aaron's house, Duke? Sure never expected you here."

Tara spoke up. "The A O V came, knocked Grandpa down and were taking me when Mister Brackett drove them off."

The outlaw's eyes glittered. "Good work, boy," he muttered, "but bad enemies. You wondered what happened to me? I knowed you wouldn't move fast in the mud so I taken some men an', without sayin' anything, rode down here."

"Why, Chinati? We thought you were dead."

"Why?" Chinati laughed. "Same reason you came down. Kate. You follered Larribee down, no?"

"Sure. How'd you know?"

"Piecin' two an' two together, with Kate. She told me about jumpin' them rustlers, gettin' whupped an' captured. An' how Larribee rode into their camp, cut her loose an' fetched her here for a rich, woman-hungry polygamist. He collected important money for that job."

"Kate . . . you found her?"

"Found her? Hell, I've got her. Taken her out the window of her new A O V husband's house. Knowed if Limpy Kells had taught you as well as he done me, you'd cut Larribee's sign an' take his trail. It worried me. You whupped them rustlers?"

"Plenty."

"Got the cattle?"

"Yep."

"Where's Lucky?"

"In charge, drivin' toward the Crossing. He fought well, Chinati. Hard to believe he's a skunk."

"Lucky," scowled Chinati, "drives beef for the powerful A O V. Unsatisfied to grow with the colony, them buzzards go into the trail herd business, stealin' beef from Herrera, drivin' north an' robbin' off-guard outfits." He took Duke's arm, grinning. "Folks, here's the young feller who's been sparkin' my wife, Kate. A white man too, from sweat-band to boot toes."

"Chinati," yelled Duke. "Kate is your wife?"

"For five years, son. I set her up in the Keno Palace so's I could see her once in a while. Many times she wanted to tell you,

but her heart's so big she hated to hurt you. Hope you don't think unkindly of her."

"Of Kate?" Duke tried to laugh unconvincingly. "I couldn't. You're lucky."

"Plumb. But here I beat my gums with time a-wastin'. Where's Aaron?"

"Abed, William." Tara opened the sick room. "Go in."

The outlaw walked in and they heard his voice. He reappeared, a strange look in his eyes. "What I had for Aaron must wait," he murmured.

Granny glared. "What ails you, William? If Gran'pa's asleep, wake him up."

"He's sleeping too sound, Miz Abelard. Too sound to wake. Aaron's dead."

Tara cried, "No!" She twisted her hands, moaning. Tara glanced into the darkened sick room, then at Duke. He read her thoughts. She was thinking of the one who had buffaloed Aaron, thinking vengeance as he had thought it, beside those graves on the Shakaska.

"This," choked Chinati, "is another item to be settled. We've work to do an' mighty little time. I'll fetch men to bury Aaron an' load the possibles into the wagon. Granny an' Tara gotta leave here." He eyed Duke. "I listened in on a A O V meeting, son. They're due here at daylight, after glaumin' your herd at Cuevas Spring—you know, the cave in the *picacho*—an hour after moonrise. Larribee was at the meeting, but he'll be with the herd. At the coyote call, he'll turn guns on my men. The A O V will roll in then, finish the bloody business an' turn the cattle through the gap, they hope. You ride to warn my boys. They'll handle it."

Crisply, he sketched the plan. After starting the Abelard wagon out of the valley, he'd take his men to Cuevas Spring, hoping to beat the shooting. When they'd broken the back of A O V, they'd take Granny and Tara back to their farm, or to Texas. He departed then, promising to return at dusk.

When he was gone, Granny went in to her dead. Duke was alone with Tara, in the kitchen. "It's hard," she confessed, "to quit the only home you remember."

"You'll leave," Duke asked, "even if we break the A O V?"

"I'll leave. There's nothing here. No markets, no freedom. Too much bigotry. Don't know what I'll do, but . . . oh, what's the difference?" She rose. "Now I must pack."

Duke tried to cheer her as they worked. But words could not reconcile her loss nor promise her future in Texas. She cooked the meal. Granny wouldn't eat. Tara and Duke sat alone at the table, saying little. Once she raised pitying eyes. "It's so tough, Duke."

"I know, Tara."

"I mean about you. Loving that girl so long, then discovering she was married all the time. Kinder if she had told you, straight off."

Duke was startled, not by her words but by the fact that Kate was completely out of mind. "Maybe her way was best, Tara. Once it would have hurt; now it doesn't seem to matter."

She looked at him, her eyes challenging. "It doesn't? Why not?"

"Don't savvy it. Maybe because your troubles make mine look trivial. Maybe just you."

"Me?" Her lips curved. "You hardly know me. The chances you took; the threat of the A O V, your fight tonight. I'm bad medicine for you, Duke."

They watched each other, the supper forgotten. Duke said, "Good medicine, Tara. I look at you and start thinking. I'll struggle through, I reckon, but not because I haven't a hearth fire, with a woman waiting. Such things aren't for me."

"What about a girl?" she flung at him. "A house, a man to lord it, children—those are blessed in a girl's thoughts. But the bargains that are offered. . . ." Her lip curled bitterly. She rose, gathering up dishes, choking back tears. Duke caught her hand. She shook it off, moved away. "Don't. That's not the way of it. I take no one on the rebound."

REACTION left him chill, blank. Wordlessly, he helped with the dishes. That finished, he found the afternoon gone. He caught up his hat. "Time to leave," he said, stiffly. "Sorry you dislike me so. I hope you find that house and the man." He went outside for his pony. Moments later he was loping toward the gap. The women would be safe, he told himself. It was dusk and Chinati was coming to bury Aaron and load the wagon.

Duke gave his pony its head, never forc-

ing it. Night had fallen when he hit the sharp uptilt giving into the pass. Settled in his leather, he gave his mind to something far beyond the gap, beyond Cueva Spring where the power of greed would be tested, beyond the Border to resumption of his personal problems.

His work in Mexico, for Kate, was done. His mother must be told of young Bill's death. Neighbors, whose regard he esteemed, must be told their trust had been misplaced, their cattle lost, their sons or trusted hands slaughtered. Before he approached these tasks, he must pick up the cold trail of the burly, white-maned killer, who struck with the name of God on his lips and a flaming gun in his hand. He *had* to get that man.

Such were his thoughts as he neared the pass and they were interrupted by a sudden echo of hoofbeats from behind. Duke looked back, but could not pierce the darkness. He put his pony into the brush. A shadowy rider came on, drawing rein to listen.

"Nothing now. I'd have sworn I heard his hoofbeats."

Duke released his pony's nostril's. "Tara!"

"Duke!" She cried his name joyfully, spurring across the interval. "I'm glad I caught you. . . . I was nasty, Duke. Can you forgive me?"

"You rode all the way out here to ask that?"

"No. But I must speak of it first, mustn't I? You'll please forgive my unkindness?"

"Of course, Tara. You did pretty well to hold yourself together."

"Thanks, Duke. Mister Crain sent me. Almost better than anybody, I can cry like a coyote. I'm to post outside the camp when you ride in. Not too long after moonrise, I'll sound the signal, fooling Larribee's men. You will have warned your boys and when Larribee makes his move, you'll take care of them. When the A O V give their signal, you're to answer with gunfire. Ezra will attack, expecting help that is not there. William Crain will be behind them. Then . . ." her voice shook, "the people of Colonia Segundo will know peace, pray God."

"Amen," murmured Duke, and together they moved into the pass.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### "God Giveth . . . . . "

THEY came out of the tumbled hills, the promise of a moon bright in the east. Before them reared the tortured black bulk of the *picacho,* like a weary Indian woman laboring through the night with an intolerable burden. To the north, where sweet water from the *cueva* meandered away like a writhing green snake, flickered the fire of the Polverado men. And, beyond, the dark bulk of the bedded herd.

"Beautiful," whispered Tara, where they had halted their ponies to stare.

Duke was looking at her now, startled by the change in her. In her dress, she had seemed fragile, very effeminate. Now, in weathered denims, half boots, her braids tucked under a floppy hat and a business-like gun belt about her middle, she looked ruggedly boyish, fully equal to whatever grim task the night offered. She felt his scrutiny, turned to look at him.

Duke held her eyes a moment, sensing the repression of imprisoned words. In that pause, a leaping flame of tenderness flickered and flared. Something stronger than his fear of her temper impelled Duke. He was close to her and he put his hand behind her neck and drew her to him. His lips found hers and then he let her go. She straightened her hat and the color was strong in her cheeks. "I . . . I owed you that, Duke."

"The debt is paid, Tara. It's good-bye in case anything. . . ."

"Don't say it, Duke. Get down there. How much time do you want?"

He scanned the east. "Give me twenty minutes," he said, and spurred down the slope. She's good, he thought. A girl like that . . . oh, I'd have no right to ask her until I get somewhere with the job I should have been doing instead of gallivanting off down here.

Duke rode into the shallow barranca, crossed the meagre, sluggish flow and put his pony up the far bank. The fire was directly ahead and he cried the camp, lighting down among the picketed ponies. A few men sat about the fire. Others lay stretched out. All came up at his "Hello the camp," quit the firelight with guns coming out.

Lucky Larribee shouted, "Who's that?"

"Duke! Pete, come out here. I want to see you."

Lucky bulked black against the fire glow then and he was hurrying. "Where the hell you been? What's wrong?"

Duke didn't answer. He was watching Pete the Pistol, a trusted lieutenant of Chinati's. He hoped Pete would get to him first, and Pete was intent on just that. Lucky was still a couple of rods away when Pete came angling to Duke's side. Duke spoke less than two dozen words, but they were enough. Pete turned away as Larribee came up, panting. "What's wrong, Duke?"

"Nary a thing, Lucky."

"Why'd you want Pete? What'd you say to him?"

Duke laughed, tossed his saddle on the ground and staked out his pony. "You sure are hell for curious, Lucky. I could tell you it's none of your business, but I won't. I just gave Pete the good news that Chinati ain't dead, like we figgered. I talked to him. He'll be along directly."

They matched strides toward the fire, where already Pete whisperingly spread the word to the Chinati mountain men. Lucky broke step. "Chinati?" he croaked. "Alive?"

"Sure. And in good health. You don't seem pleased."

The man whirled on him. "Me? Why the hell shouldn't I be pleased? Or why should I, for that matter. Chinati means less'n nothin' to me. Where is he? Why's he stayin' away?"

Duke was enjoying the man's nervousness. "Seems he's got a renegade brother in some colony or other, south a ways. I think Chinati's out to kill him."

Lucky grunted and he was thoughtfully silent. The moon stuck a big round limb over the horizon and Duke grinned as Lucky glanced at it half fearfully. At the fire, Lucky's men surveyed Duke with undisguised suspicion. They wore their restlessness like a badge. He could sense their hunger to question him, yet no man spoke.

"Boys," he said. "I get it pretty straight that some outfit's out to raid us tonight. We'll double up the guard and throw leather on the ponies." He tolled off Chinati's men by name. "Get out to the cattle. The rest of you will spell them in four hours."

"You sound drunk," Lucky scoffed. "Been holed up in some Mex cantina, Duke?" Laughter came from Larribee's men, but Chinati's outlaws weren't laughing. They were moving out for their horses. And, because this upset Lucky's carefully-laid plans, he ordered his men to saddle up. Duke, left alone at the fire, keyed to every possibility of danger, moved from the firelight and went for a fresh mount.

HE STOOD by his horse, waiting, smiling a little that neither Lucky nor any of his men had returned to the fire, which was burning low now. His plans upset, Larribee had moved his followers close to the herd, where they could strike swiftly. They were six, counting Lucky. There were nine Chinati mountain men, and Duke. Chinati would be along with three or four, depending upon whether he left two men or one with the Abelard wagon. Larribee could do the worrying.

The moon climbed the eastern sky. Duke began to cast anxious eyes toward the hills. Surely more than twenty minutes had passed since he had left Tara. Why didn't she signal. Restlessness seized Duke, and a sense of plans gone awry. He stepped into the saddle, turned the pony's nose toward higher ground, where he had left the girl. What could have happened? He remembered how his mother had fainted once, from worry. Women were like that. He wondered if it could have happened to Tara. Or had the men of the A O V surprised and captured her? He doubted they could do that without Tara raising enough of a fuss to be heard at the camp.

He rode slowly toward the hills, dreading what he might find. He suddenly realized that this girl was more important to him than anything had ever been in his life. And then it came, bringing a great sigh of relief from his lungs—the coyote call. High and sharp, eerie in the night, it began with a series of short, shrill barkings, ending in a spine-tickling howl. It was perfect. It would fool anybody.

Letting out a howl, Duke spun his pony, galloping toward the herd. Already guns were crackling there and crimson streaks of muzzle fire lanced the night. The cattle were on their feet and then they were running, bolting in every direction, bawling, horns clicking, hoofs pounding.

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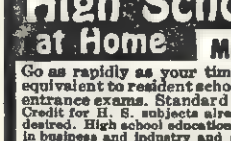
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Duke had farther to ride than he liked or had planned on. He roweled his pony cruelly and cursed his doubt of Tara as the scattered battle winked out into a few desultory shots. He knew how it had gone and he eased up his mount and then he saw the horseman come slanting out of the night, throwing spaced shots behind him. He heard Pete the Pistol's anguished cry. "It's Larribee. He's plugged my horse an' he's gettin' away."

The Chinati mountain men were spurring after him, hopelessly behind. Their saddle guns were racketing but the target was dim in the moonglow, elusive and drawing away. They would not quit Lucky's trail; Duke knew that and was worried. There would soon be a grimmer foe to face, unless Lucky warned the A O V away. But they were not the ones to ride into any trap, these fighting men who had won their spurs in the Mexican War, in hopeless battles waged by the South, in Border difficulties and in brushes with the law. Duke put worry for them from his mind as he again spun his animal and raced to cut Larribee off.

Lucky saw him coming, turned gunfire against him. Fire licked back. Bullets whined about Duke and his galloping mount. Then Lucky was reloading, fumbling the effort in his desperation. Duke slanted in, closing the gap, his gun leveled but holding his fire. "Drop it, Lucky!" he yelled. "Set it sparkin' again an' I'll have to kill you."

Three hundred feet, two hundred. Now a hundred. Duke's pony was faster and swiftly he overhauled the A O V drover. Now Lucky snapped the loading gate shut, flung a look at Duke and then one at the Chinati mountain men, far behind. It seemed to settle something in his mind. He reined in, rearing his animal. He spun and came at Duke, bawling his answer. "Drop it? For you, Brackett? Like hell. You're a thorn in my boot. I've hated you ever since I learned you'd escaped the Shakaska. You won't escape this time."

They rode at each other, Lucky shooting, Duke's gun silent. Larribee's reference to the Shakaska wipeout filled Duke's brain with fire, blotted out all else but that terrible scene so deeply burned in his consciousness. Men waking, rising up and falling in a rain of lead. The fierce resist-

ance of men already dying. The hoarse rallying yells of Old Limpy Kells—a man who hadn't learned what it is to fear.

The agony of a bullet grinding along his ribs roused Duke. He reeled in the saddle, caught at the horn. Larribee loomed terrifyingly before him, his horse rearing, his gun leveled as he aimed with an awful concentration. Duke had no consciousness of firing until his gun bucked in his hand. He saw the man's body pinch together and then the two ponies smashed together, hurling Duke from the saddle.

HE LIT heavily, rolled to his knees. Both horses were down, both struggling up. Duke drove nerve and muscle, coming to his feet. But his wound had locked his mind, slowing his impulses. He lunged for one bridle, missed and hurled himself at the other, falling again in his eagerness. He knelt there, beside the still, shapeless form of Lucky Larribee, watching those horses gallop away with flapping stirrups. At the moment it seemed nothing but annoying. The Chinati mountain men were approaching in a body, spurring hard, stirring a dust that writhed like vapor in the moon fog.

Duke yelled to them, pointing to the horses. They paid him no heed, spurring past with a roar of hoofs, their guns bared and their eyes turned to the hill. Duke whirled, and then he saw them. The men of the deadly A O V!

They came at a hand-lope, guns in their hands and assurance in their eager faces that it was Lucky and his men who approached, that the gun work had been taken care of for them. Their first knowledge that they were in error was a high yell from Pete the Pistol and a wall of gun flame licking at them. It hurled them into a confused tangle of falling horses and dying men.

Duke's first impression was the return of fear for Tara. The signal he had heard had been the promised one to start the A O V into battle. Where then was Tara? His second sensation was one long cold stream of warning pouring along his spine. From the rough talus, at the foot of the *picacho,* came a furious cry. "Look out, my warriors of consecration. Judas has betrayed us. Have no fear; the bullets of the infidels

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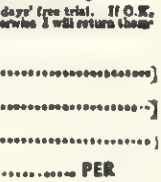

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cannot harm you. Kill, kill, kill, for the Greater Glory. God giveth and God taketh away!"

It was familiar, that bull-like bawling. How terribly familiar. It stung the fibres of Duke's brain like the bite of bullets—every word a torment. And all at once he saw what he knew he should have seen before but what he had been blind to. Chinati's build. His flowing hair. His voice. All of these had reminded him of the man who had called himself Belltower Jones—the killer of the Shakaska. That was the Prophet Ezra up yonder. Ezra Crain, head of the murderously greedy A O V.

Duke was running now, skirting the wicked battle of horsemen that swirled about the base of the *picacho*. The pain in his side deviled him. His wind grew short, agonized, and he knew he had a long way to go before he regained the strength drained out on Shakaska sands. How he ever made the rocks and scrambled up that strewn slope, he never could have told. That harsh, zealot voice halted him.

"You've found me, you godless apostate. And you've found the hour of judgment for your sins. Blessed is him who destroyeth the sinner, that his penance may be less and the sooner started. God giveth and God taketh away."

Duke could not see the killer, but a rod beyond he saw the stout, straight form of Chinati in the full moonlight. The outlaw was frozen like a statue. His features were fixed in a snarl; his eyes glittered venomously. Low and controlled, he said, "You may kill me, Ezra, but I'll take you along. Make your shots tell, for I'm coming in there to kill you."

"Come quickly, my godless brother. I will do this service for thee. Wherefore goest thou apart from us. Return to thy place and abide with Belial. Thou art a stranger and an exile."

Chinati was gathering himself for the fatal leap across the rocks that sheltered the prophet. And still Duke, with pistol leveled, could not see Ezra. And he could not longer delay. "Belltower Jones!" he called, cold and quiet.

Momentary silence. Ezra cried, "Who said that?"

"Judgment, Ezra. Payoff from the Shakaska. The Pine Tree herd, remember?

The boys were asleep, worn out. Weary kids who couldn't keep their eyes open any longer. You and your killers came in with flaming guns. 'God giveth and God taketh away.' Remember that. You left the bodies there and drove the beef away, cattle belonging to folks who had never harmed you. The God you cried to spared me alone, Ezra. Pray if you like, but I'm coming in to send you to hell."

He was standing now, his breathing calmed. His gun was in his hand. Chinati was swaying forward. From off to Duke's right came a shrill scream. And there was Tara, her gun held before her, her face convulsed as she picked her way through the rocks toward the prophet. "No, Duke . . . William. Stay back, both of you. I'll kill him. It's my right. He had my father murdered. He sold mother into a slavery only suicide could end. He killed my Gran'pa. He's mine."

From his hidden cranny, Ezra loosed an animal snarl. His gun spoke. To Duke, watching the girl with terrible fascination, it seemed that the bullet cut her in two. Her scream shrilled again and she went down, disappearing among the boulders. It released Duke. He roared, hurtled. Chinati was sweeping in. Ezra rose to meet him, moonlight running along the barrel of his lifting gun. Ezra fired, but his slug did nothing to stop his enraged brother. Duke hit his trigger and the prophet stiffened, reared to tiptoe. Duke shot and shot again and Ezra went down with a great raging bellow. Chinati leaped down where he had fallen.

Duke halted, wondering at the silence. A glance at the plain showed the battle de-

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teriorating into individual chases, with dead A O V littering the earth and the survivors fleeing. Habituated to preying upon peaceful, helpless folk, they were no match for half their number tempered in the red crucible of man conflict.

Like a man bludgeoned, feeling no emotion, Duke threaded his way toward the spot where Tara had fallen. So numbed was he it didn't seem strange that Chinati was on his knees beside the brother he had been cheated from killing.

Guardedly, fearfully, Duke called, "Tara!"

Magically she came up, holding her head, wiping blood from her face. She saw him, called his name and held out her arms to him. He said, "For God's sake, girl, don't move. I'll carry you down to camp."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Duke Brackett. You're like all the others; you've just got to get your arms about a girl."

Duke gaped. "You're not hurt?"

"Of course I'm hurt, silly. Ezra shot off my heel and I bumped my head when I fell. Is he . . .?"

"Dead, Tara."

She held out her hand to him and he caught it and jumped down beside her. They looked at each other and he swiped his finger down her face, shaking off blood. And then her arms were about his neck and his arms were about her, holding her close. He kissed her and her response thrilled him.

Presently he said, "I'm just like all the other men," he taunted. "Is this bad?"

"Mmmmm, good," she murmured, and buried her face on his chest.

THE END


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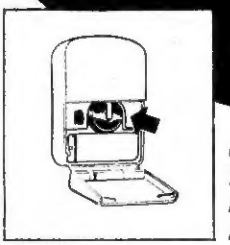

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